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Doing the Unthinkable

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DOING THE UNTHINKABLE

Theology and Moral Epistemology in Three Early Christian Thinkers.

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"The lightning flashes of the divine beauty are absolutely ineffable and indescribable; speech cannot convey them; the ear cannot receive them. The morning star's rays, and the moon's brightness, and the sun's light, all these are unworthy to be mentioned in comparison to that glory, and are found greatly wanting as analogies to the true light. They are more distant from the divine beauty than the depth of night and moonless gloom are from the pure light of noonday. This beauty is not contemplated by fleshly eyes but is grasped by the soul alone and the mind. If at any time it shined upon the saints, it also left behind in them the unbearable pain of yearning." (Basil of Caesarea, c. 329-379)

Abstract (Danish)

Gennem tre casestudier argumenterer denne afhandling for, at der findes et nært forhold mellem på den ene side den negative teologi, som følger af den radikale, kvalitative distinktion mellem Skaber og skabning, som forefindes i mange tidlige kristne teologier, og på den anden side bestemte moralepistemologiske udviklinger i denne tænkning. Denne distinktion omtales i afhandlingen som den 'jødisk-kristne distinktion'. Ved 'negativ teologi' forstås et epistemologisk og lingvistisk princip, som kun tillader tale om Guds væsen eller natur i negative definitioner. Gennem en række antropologiske og etiske forbindelsespunkter har dette princip en række mulige konsekvenser for moralepistemologien.

Enhver teologisk refleksion som antager denne form for negativ teologi, vil i nogen grad være en *theologia viatorum*. Som en teologisk undergenre som sådan, vil det også gøre sig gældende for teologisk etik. Dertil kommer at den dynamik, som er et resultat af den jødisk-kristne distinktion, gennem den delvist bibelske og delvist filosofiske idé om, at mennesket skal efterligne eller efterfølge Gud, kan spores i moralfilosofiske forestillinger om ting såsom dyd, perfektion og det gode. Dette har igen konsekvenser for moralepistemologien.

Afhandlingen diskuterer tre casestudier: 1) Brevet til Diognetus (Diognetbrevet) (2. årh. e.Kr.) hvor Guds usynlighed og gerninger i frelseshistorien gør efterlignelse af Gud til et delvist paradoksalt forhold; 2) Klemens af Alexandria (c. 150-215 e.Kr.) i hvis værker findes en spænding mellem at efterligne den simple og uudsigelige guddommelige natur, og Jesu Kristi konkrete gerninger; 3) Gregor af Nyssa (c. 335-395 e.Kr.) i hvis værker negativ teologi, en forestilling om Guds uendelighed og en særlig sprogfilosofi fører til udviklingen af en avanceret og kompleks idé om moralsk perfektion. Der argumenteres for, at selvom der er store forskelle på de tre casestudier, er de alle eksempler på hvordan den jødisk-kristne distinktion influerer moralepistemologien gennem en form for negativ teologi, en forestilling om efterlignelse eller efterfølgelse af Gud, samt bestemte antropologiske forbindelsespunkter.

Abstract (English)

Through three case studies this dissertation argues that there is a close relationship between on the one hand the negative theology, resulting from the radical qualitative distinction between Creator and creation discernible in many early Christian theologies, and on the other certain developments in the moral epistemology of this thinking. This distinction is in the dissertation termed 'the Judeo-Christian distinction'. By negative theology is meant an epistemological and linguistic notion that only allows talk of the divine essence or nature in negative definitions. Through a range of anthropological and ethical points of connection this idea has a number of possible ramifications for moral epistemology.

Any theological reflection that presupposes this kind of negative theology will to some degree be a *theologia viatorum*. As a sub-genre of theology as such, this will also be the case for theological ethics. Moreover, through the idea, partly biblical, partly philosophical, that human beings should in some way imitate, be assimilated to or follow God, the dynamics produced by the Judeo-Christian distinction and negative theology can be recognized in moral philosophical conceptions of such things as virtue, perfection, and the good. This again has consequences for moral epistemology.

The dissertation discusses three case studies: 1) *The Epistle to Diognetus* (2nd century AD), where God's invisibility and his works in the history of salvation makes human imitation of God a somewhat paradoxical matter; 2) Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD) in whose works there is a tension between imitating the simple and ineffable divine nature, and the concrete works of Jesus Christ; 3) Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395 AD) in whose works negative theology, a notion of divine infinity and a certain philosophy of language is influential in the development of an advanced and complex idea of moral perfection. In the last chapter it is argued that even though there are great differences between the three, all are examples of how the Judeo-Christian distinction affects moral epistemology through a form of negative theology, an idea of imitation or following God, and certain anthropological points of connection.

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Preface

References to works will be in italics, e.g. *AdDiog., The Epistle to Diognetus.* In the body text is used English titles. References are of the form '([author]), [Latin title and reference], [page reference to English translation]. Author and edition are only specified if abbreviation of title is not introduced in the list of abbreviations. For example: *Str.* 4.3.8.4, p. 410 refers to Clement of Alexandria, Stromata PG 4.3.8.4, ANF p. 410.

The critical editions used are mostly those available through the online *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae.*

For English translations the ANF and NPNF are typically used as an offset. This is primarily due to availability, though the translations are to a large degree not up to date. Hence the quoted passages are often modified.

Original Greek text is added inside quoted passages in so far as needed, in soft brackets. For references to the original Greek will be used Greek unicode: For example “the Existent (τὸ ὄν)”. The most central Greek terms will also be transliterated into beta code, e.g. *epinoia, diastema, epektasis.* Anglicized versions of Greek words are italicized, e.g. *diastemic, apophatic.*

The author of the dissertation uses plural singular for self-reference, 'we'.

Introduction

The hypothesis of the following is that the radical qualitative distinction between Creator and creator, that we find in different forms in much early Christian thinking, gives rise to a negative theology that will often have implications for moral epistemology. This distinction, the Judeo-Christian distinction,[1] is what defines the relationship between Creator and creation. These are separated by a qualitative difference, though bridged in so far the Creator acts and reveals himself in the world. This framework is the background for ontology as well as for epistemology. In relation to ethics it becomes relevant for the relationship between human beings and God, not least in so far as human beings are said to be made in (or according to) the image of God,[2] and are thus supposed to imitate or follow God, or similar. This imitation must always be understood simultaneously in negative as well as positive terms.

Negative theology is, in the words of Guilio Maspero, “in its most profound essence, conversion.”[3] Negative theology means a break with any idea of an

1 This is a generic term. See below.
2 Gen 1:27
3 Maspero 2007, p. 144. What we call 'negative theology' Maspero calls 'apophatism'. Others use the term 'apophaticism', but there are reasons for reserving these terms for

unbroken continuity between positive thinking and being. Hence it gives philosophical and theological reflection and speculation an impetus, that also breaks it off in its processes. Thinking based on negative theology tends to be unstable. Negative theology is in its proper sense a *theologia viatorum,* a theology of the way, true, though inadequate: True in so far as it goes out from and leads to God, but inadequate in so far as it can never conceptually and structurally represent its object in any final way. Hence the idea of an 'adequate negative theology' is a contradiction in terms. Theological moral epistemology cannot escape this condition: Given the Judeo-Christian distinction and its implied negative theology, there can be no final and adequate comprehension of the good, and no final system of ethics, only one in development and re-consideration. Though such an ethics cannot be adequate, it can still be true.

Through a range of anthropological and ethical connection-points, not least the idea that human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), this idea has a number of influences on moral epistemology.

The study attempts to exemplify this idea through three case studies. The idea is far from being original, but our main contention is, that such an approach to our cases can bring out elements, that are sometimes overlooked or underestimated.

Our approach is in some aspects 'speculative'. We are not doing a concise study into the history of certain theological or philosophical ideas, neither do we wish to read the authors solely one their own terms. Still, we must closely consider the texts on their own terms as far as possible to avoid anachronisms.

In the first part we will develop a generic definition of what to understand by the Judeo-Christian distinction and the negative theology resulting from it. Philosophy does not necessarily deal in arguments. Just as important is the task of developing concepts that makes us able to comprehend, ask and attempt answers, to fundamental questions. This is not least true for intellectual history and the history of philosophy. The definitions worked out in the following will serve as tools to grasp the fundamental relationships between theology, ontology, epistemology, anthropology and ethics in our three case studies. Our claim is that even if these conceive of negative theology in widely different ways, and even if their ethics are very different, they are still build around a somewhat common framework.

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particular uses. By 'negative theology' will be meant a broad generic definition, with *apophatism/apophaticism* as a subgenre.

Part I. Negative theology and ethics in the early Church: Introduction, terminology and methodology.

> *"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." (1 Jn 4:12)*

Some observations on the Judeo-Christian distinction, negative theology and ethics in early Christian thought

Negative theology comes in many varieties. The following introduces a range of examples of negative theology and related subjects from the early Church (i.e. until the 4th century). Initially, at the beginning of Church history, negative theological thought-forms were rarely applied systematically, if ever. The *New Testament* contains examples that could arguably be classified as negative theology, but these are hardly 'philosophical' or specimens of any systematic theology. If any, some of the (Pseudo-)Pauline epistles and the gospel of John come closest. Things change as Christian thinkers increasingly take up and utilizes Hellenic culture, terminologies, philosophy, rhetoric. Most often as a weapon against Hellenic religion and philosophy itself. But gradually negative theology akin to that used by contemporary Neo-Platonists and others are applied for positive purposes. Hence, the increased diversity in the use of negative theological language in the early Church is to a large degree due to the influx of philosophical traditions in Christian thought. Some of these philosophical traditions were themselves developed, however, with an influence of Oriental ideas.

The development of negative theology affected the views on such issues as faith, knowledge and ethics. But before looking at some possible views on how ethics (moral epistemology in particular) can be conceived from the perspective of negative theology, we will simply look at some examples of negative theology, primarily from the early Church (until the fourth century).

What is the 'Judeo-Christian distinction'?

The term 'Judeo-Christian[4] distinction' has been used in a range of contexts to denote the differences between such things as the letter and the spirit,[5] or the religious and the political. In our definition it first of all refers to the radical

4 The term 'Judeo-Christian' is a fairly modern concept typically used to describe common ethical standards in the Judaic and Christian worldviews. Though being a modern term it as such fits well to describe the fundamental likenesses between, e.g., the philosophy of late antique Alexandrian Judaism (Philo) and early Christian thinking.

5 For example Redekop 1999

qualitative distinction between Creator and creation that characterizes much traditional Christian theological thinking.[6] We borrow the term with modifications from Robert Sokolowski who defined 'the Christian distinction' not so much as a line drawn between the transcendent and immanent, or even between that which we can only speak of negatively and that which we can have positive knowledge about, as a distinction "between God and everything".[7] This distinction "defines how we are to understand God, how we are to understand the world, and how we are to understand the relationship between the world and God."[8]

In the Hebrew Scriptures the idea is perhaps best expressed in Ecc 5:2: "God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." As a 'theological idea', by the Judeo-Christian distinction we mean a distinction that has consequences for all traditional areas of philosophy, whether ontology, epistemology and finally ethics.[9] It is our claim that this distinction is the key framework through which most negative theology in late antique Christian and Jewish thinking must be conceived.[10] As Gregory of Nyssa says: "[...]wide and insurmountable is the interval that divides and fences off uncreated from created nature (πολὺ γὰρ τὸ μέσον καὶ ἀδιεξίτητον, ᾧ πρὸς τὴν κτιστὴν οὐσίαν ἡ ἄκτιστος φύσις διατετείχισται)."[11] If Hans Uhrs Von Balthasar is right, then for Gregory the first essential characteristic of the creature is negative, consisting in the very fact that the creature is not God.[12]

In this case, as in many others, the Judeo-Christian distinction is related to a conception of the world as created rather than generated by God. By creation is in Christian theology traditionally meant that the Creator creates *ex nihilo.* This is different from, e.g., Plato's account in *Timaeus*, where the Demiurge remolds

6 For example Aristides: "He has no name, for everything which has a name is kindred to things created". Aristides, *Apologia* 1, p. 264. See also, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa *ConEunII.* 96, p. 260.

7 Sokolowski 1995, p. 32

8 Sokolowski 1995, p. xiii

9 In modern theology a version of this idea is, of course, best known from Søren Kierkegaard and 'dialectical theology', e.g., Karl Barth. We should, however, beware of forcing late antique theologies into the concepts of this tradition.

10 See Mortley 1986; Wissink 2000; Sokolowski 1995; Jenson 2002, pp. 163-164; Burrell 2004. Burrell argues that the idea is also present in, e.g., Maimonides and Al-Ghazali, i.e., in non-Christian theologies, and calls it a Jewish-Christian-Muslim distinction. For our purposes 'Judeo-Christian' is the most fitting ('Judeo-' referring primarily to Philo). Burrell 2004, p. 218

11 Gregory continues: "The latter is limited, the former not. The latter is confined within its own boundaries according to the pleasure of its Maker. The former is bounded only by infinity. The latter stretches itself out within certain degrees of extension, limited by time and space: the former transcends all notion of degree, baffling curiosity from every point of view." *ConEunII.* 69, p. 257

12 Balthasar 1988, p. 27

existing matter.[13] This latter idea is present in the *Book of Wisdom*,[14] Philo, and in some early Patristic sources,[15] but even if this is the case, there was an early tendency in Patristic literature, and also Philo, to uphold a qualitative (rather than quantitative) distinction between God and everything else.[16] If not so much in terms of ontology, then at least in terms of epistemology and ethics (this becomes clear as we consider the negative theology that unfolds around this notion).[17] For example, as Wolfson argues, Philo's use of negative attributes in the description of God "[...]is presented only as a way of expressing the scriptural principle of the unlikeness between God and all other beings."[18] Negative theology is closely related to this distinction.

Upholding the Judeo-Christian distinction was, if Sokolowski is right, the central concern in the Christological controversies all the way up to the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451).[19] Also, it was central for the Cappadocians in their attacks on Eunomianism. Even if they used negative theology in their 'mystical', 'spiritual' and 'ascetic' theology, its theoretical ground was a claim about the qualitative distinction between the infinite and the finite. Hence, with a modern terminology, theology based on the Judeo-Christian distinction is of 'the Wholly Other', though maybe 'the Wholly First' would a more proper name, at least with Philo and Clement who repeatedly identifies God with the One and the First Principle, so that God's simplicity or 'firstness' is that which distinguishes Him from the rest of creation.

The (Judeo-)Christian distinction draws a negation line "[...]through all positive dicta about God."[20] God cannot simply be defined as the highest being among other beings or that Being in which other beings participate (even if this often happens), but must be defined as a being quite different from all others.[21] Hence from this distinction follows the need for negative theology. In Gregory of Nyssa, the aim of negative theology is to make clear that the divine nature does not have any

13 Timaeus 32C-33A
14 Wis 11:17
15 Justin Martyr, *Apologia* 1.59; Clement of Alexandria, *Str.* 5.14. Kelly argues that Justin did not hold matter to be co-eternal with God. Kelly 1978
16 Especially against Pagan philosophies and Gnosticism. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was established in Roman Catholicism in 1215.
17 Yahwe's response to Moses in Exodus 3:13, "ehyeh aser ehyeh", translated in LXII as "I am HE WHO IS" and by Philo as "I am THE BEING", is often taken as signifying that God is, but that by being different from His creation, he cannot be known. Philo, *De Vita Mosis* 1.75
18 Wolfson 1957, p. 145
19 Sokolowski 1995
20 Wissink 2000, p. 106
21 The concluding chapters will discuss these general claims further, on the background of our case studies.

relationship with “these things below”.[22] God is not just distinguished in his difference from other things, but he is “differently different”,[23], i.e. the way God is different from His creation is itself different from the way things in creation differs from each other.

The Judeo-Christian distinction seems to bar any form of 'natural theology'.[24] There are examples of sorts of natural theology in the Scriptures, however. In the *Book of Wisdom*, we hear that “by the greatness and beauty of the creatures proportionably the maker of them is seen.”[25] This passage is often alluded to in Patristic literature, not least the Cappadocians (Gregory of Nyssa in particular). In the *New Testament*, an example which is often taken as an instance of natural theology, is Paul’s claim in Rom 1:20. This passage has the interesting quality of also having a certain negative theological bend:

> “For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity”[26]

Somewhat paradoxically, Paul seems to be saying that even though God’s “invisible things (τὰ … ἀόρατα)” cannot be seen, they are nevertheless visible through nature. But it is not at all obvious that this is an instance of a simply positive (not negative) natural theology *per se*.[27] Of course one interpretation could be that Paul believes the properties of God to be indirectly discernible. But maybe Paul is saying that it is the invisibility of God’s things as such that is discernible? In other words, by looking at creation we are able to reach the conclusion that God cannot be seen, that He is completely different and cannot be approached. Hence Paul is using a common philosophical idea of natural theology to express the Judeo-Christian distinction and a negative theology.

By the Judeo-Christian distinction, we should notice, is not meant the actual ontological difference between Creator and creation as such, but an idea that reflects this difference (or the experience of such a difference).[28] In negative theologies based on the Judeo-Christian distinction God cannot be fully grasped,

22 *ConEunI.* PG 1104
23 Sokolowski 1995; Wissink 2000
24 In his lost work *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum*, Marcus Terentius Varro distinguished between three kinds of theology: Civil theology, mythical theology, and natural theology. For reasons of precision we talk of *theosemiotics* instead.
25 Wis 13:5, KJV. There is hardly any negative theology in the *Book of Wisdom*.
26 Rom 1:20
27 Gregory of Nyssa has an interesting discussion of this passage. See below. *Cant.* 384-385
28 For Sokolowski the distinction is phenomological. We treat it, perhaps, rather as a mode of thinking, something that structures thought and experience in a particular way.

whether by positive or negative definitions. Such theology rather attempts to grasp the ineffableness of God. But this does not preclude that we in some way can have a direct experience of this fact. According to Sokolowski the distinction between God and human beings is first of all something to be lived, i.e. it has a practical and phenomenological meaning.[29] This presumably explains why it is not always explicitly present in texts. Only secondarily is it something to be reflected upon. The distinction is "always energetic and always needs to be worked out and worked through, because we have a permanent propensity to take the whole as ultimate and to see the divine as part of the whole."[30] But, says he, theology does not establish the distinction, but it can confirm and protect it. Our claim in the following is that the distinction leaves certain traces in theology, first of all negative theology, but also anthropology and ethics. It does so in such a way that reflection on these issues must be conceived of as a processual, continuously ongoing matter, a *theologia viatorum* (see below).

Our approach is, to start with, epistemological: From the Judeo-Christian distinction (which we take for granted) follows the need for certain forms of negative theology, since there can be no successful attempts of comprehending the Creator, as such.[31] What this means is the topic of the following.[32]

Negative theology

By using the concept 'negative theology' we enter a minefield. The term is often associated with obscurantism, anti-intellectualism or worse. The Greek variant of the term, '*apophatic*' theology, might seem more neutral, though the meaning is roughly the same. But for reasons that will hopefully become clear, we will stick to the term 'negative theology' in the following (*apophatic* theology will be defined as a sub-genre of this). As a temporary generic definition we will by 'negative theology' simply understand any statement about God that, whether implicitly or explicitly mentioning or referring to God or our experience of God, uses negations,

29 Sokolowski 1995, pp. 23-24
30 Sokolowski 1993, p. 198
31 That two things are distinct does not, of course, in itself preclude a positive epistemology. The traditional idea that for something to be known it must have something in common with the knower seems to be presupposed in much negative theology. That the Judeo-Christian distinction is 'radical' means that there can be no relationship between Creation and creator, ontologically or epistemologically, unless established by God.
32 This exemplifies an important aspect of our methodology: We are looking into what happens if certain ontological ideas are taken for granted. This endeavour is philosophical in so far as it seeks to connect ontology, epistemology and ethics in an abstract. We do not, however, for now assume any radical distinction between theology and philosophy.

whether in relation to ontology, epistemology or ethics. Following this definition negative theology need not be systematic in any way, or a philosophical 'method' or 'discipline'. As a broad tradition, negative theology in this sense not only encompasses those famous 'mystic' theologies of a Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 5th-6-th century AD) or a Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327 AD), but a range of ways of talking about the divine present in widely different contexts. Negative theology is not necessarily an attempt to systematically describe God's nature, but can just as well be the result of the acknowledgment that such theology is not possible.

One of the most extreme examples of negative theology might very well be John Scot Eriugena (9th century AD) who claimed that, “We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being.”[33] The idea of God as above being (ὑπερουσία) is a Pseudo-Dionysian concept.[34] This kind of negative theology is often considered the 'standard' version. But we can find much less flamboyant forms of negative theological speech about God in the early Church. Taking the extreme examples of later negative theology as paradigmatic too easily blurs our vision.

Hence we do not define negative theology as Jacques Ellul in his commentary on *Ecclesiastes*. For Ellul, the central theme for the Qoheleth is the impossibility of formulating a positive, rational and systematic theology:

> “What has been called “negative theology” becomes a temptation at this point. But that will not do either, since it constitutes a *theology* – still another discourse about God, and therefore a means of forcing him into our categories.”[35]

It is our claim that negative theology in the Patristic period is often exactly an acknowledgment of the fact that God cannot be forced “into our categories” (this results from the Judeo-Christian distinction). Often later negative theologies as that of Pseudo-Dionysius are considered more 'radical' than the earlier ones of, e.g., Philo or the apologetic fathers. From the Ellulian perspective the opposite is the case, since the latter falls for the temptation to make negative theology into a kind of philosophical speculation rather than a break with philosophy as such. When we talk of negative theology in the following, the term will refer to both understandings.

Instances of negative theology can be found throughout the tradition of Greek

33 John Scottus Eriugena, *Periphyseon* 2.589b-c
34 In Pseudo-Dionysius (5th-6th cent. AD) God is systematically conceived of as 'above' (ὕπερ) whatever positive concepts we can think of ascribing to Him.
35 Ellul 1990, p. 220

philosophy. Already in the Pre-Socratics we find a somewhat negative vocabulary in descriptions of the divine. A famous quote was attributed to Thales by Diogenes Laërtius: “What is divine? What has no origin, nor end.”[36] Another example of early negative theology is Anaximander’s notion of the ἄπειρον, the infinite, unbounded ἀρχῆ of everything, an indefinite, unbounded spatial reservoir.[37] Being a description of a ‘first principle’ using a negative definition, ἄ-πειρον, this was arguably an instance of negative theology.

While infinity and other ontological concepts becomes central in later negative theology, epistemological terms such as the notion of ineffability was central for much negative theology before Gregory of Nyssa (e.g. Philo, see below). Neither Plato nor Aristotle had any real negative theology, though some passages stresses the difficulty of declaring God.[38] Important for later negative theology was this passage from *Timaeus*:

> “Now to discover the Maker and Father of this Universe were a task indeed; and having discovered Him, to declare Him unto all men were a thing impossible.”[39]

This passage was in the Patristic tradition taken as an example that Plato had some indirect knowledge about God, through knowledge of his ineffability (e.g. Clement of Alexandria). What Plato says is, however, that there are some men who will not be able to understand God, not that God is wholly ineffable (something which, among others, Origen was aware of).[40] It is to a large degree Aristotle's definitions of such central terms as ἀπόφασις (negation), ἀφαίρεσις (abstraction), and στέρησις (privation), that lays the ground for the technical developments in negative theology.[41] Aristotle did not himself, however, hold a negative theology. Negative theology as a more developed way of speaking about the divine seems to have its origin and background in the Hellenic-Judaic philosophy of Philo of Alexandria (20 BC-59 AD), who according to Louth “[…]certainly has some claim to be called the Father of negative theology.”[42]. Philo writes that:

> “Do not however suppose that the Existent (τὸ ὄν) which truly exists is apprehended (καταλαμβάνεσθαι) by any man; for we have in us no organ by which we can envisage it, neither in sense, for it is imperceptible by sense

36 Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum* 1.1
37 See Jaeger 1947, p. 34
38 Wolfson 1947, 1957
39 Plato, Tim 28c, tr. Lamb 1925
40 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.43
41 Mortley 1986, p. 255. These concepts will be discussed below.
42 Louth 2007. See also Wolfson 1952, p. 115

(οὔτ’ αἴσθησιν), nor yet in mind (οὔτε νοῦν).”[43]

In his allegorical readings of the Jewish Scriptures, Philo described God as without attributes, incorruptible (ἄφθαρτος), and incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτος). It has been argued that Philo was the first to call God ‘ineffable’ (ἄρρητος).[44] This arguably follows from the ontological fact that God has no qualities, he is ἄποιος.[45] These concepts are important ontological and epistemological components of later negative theologies.

Philo's negative theology was based on a distinction between Creator and creation, that made God as such inapproachable outside work and revelation. As claimed such a distinction serves as the backbone or framework for many later negative theologies in the Patristic period. God is essential being (τὸ ὄντως ὄν)[46] but according to Philo we can know that God exists but not what He is.[47] Only in so far as God is active and relates to us through works and revelation can we know anything about the divine. Hence, Philo distinguishes between God’s essence (sometimes οὐσία) and activities (ἐνέργεια) (see quotation below).[48] It is not clear exactly what this distinction consists in ontologically. Is God fully present in his activities as seems to be the case in Gregory of Nyssa?[49] Or are his activities different from his essence as in Gregory Palamas (1296-1359 AD)? At any rate, from an epistemological perspective this distinction in Philo enables us to distinguish between the divine essence which can only be spoken of in negative definitions and the divine activities which can be comprehended.

Philo imagines that God told Moses about His activities that:

> “[…]while in their essence (κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν) they are incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτοι), they nevertheless present to your sight a sort of impress and copy of their activity (ἐνεργείας). […] Do not, then, hope ever to be able to apprehend (καταλαβεῖν) Me or any of my Powers (δυνάμεων) in our essence (κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν). But I readily and with goodwill admit you to a share of what is attainable.”[50]

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43 Philo, *De Mutatione Nominum* 7.10, quoted from Louth 1983, p. 20. Notice that Philo does not here use the privative alpha to form negative names.
44 Wolfson 1957, p. 156. Wolfson translates *arretos* as unutterable, but the norm seems to be to translate this as 'ineffable'. We reserve 'unutterable' for *aphatos* instead.
45 Philo, *Legum Allegoriae* 1.51
46 With a phrase used by Plato of the ideas. Philo, *De Mutatione Nominum* 27
47 Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* 1.6-8
48 Though the distinction is only worked out in detail much later, it is arguably present in early Patristic theology also. See Hägg 2006
49 See, e.g., Balás 1966
50 Philo, *Specialibus Legibus* 1.47-49. Quoted from D. Bradshaw, Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom, Cambridge 2004, p. 63, modified.

God is ineffable and cannot be apprehended because of his simplicity (in Gregory of Nyssa it becomes his infinity), but through his activities he relates to the multiplicity of the world. These activities can be named. God's activities are sometimes identified with Plato's ideas (“Some among you call them not inaptly Forms or Ideas, since they bring form into everything that is[...]”).[51] These are not abstract entities since they depend on God and as the powers of God their essence is unknowable.

Philo's distinction between essence and activity was not completely new. P.L. Reynolds has argued that the distinction between essence (οὐσία) and powers, works, activities is somewhat present in a fragment from Onatas and the pseudo-Aristotelian *De Mundo*.[52] The οὐσία-ἐνέργεια distinction might be reminiscent of the Aristotelian distinction between potentiality (δύναμις) and actuality (or action) (ἐντελεχείᾳ and ἐνέργεια).[53] But where God's activity in Aristotle is as self-thinking thought, in Philo it is creation. Also, in Aristotle knowing that something exists also implies knowing something about what it is. Philo applied the distinction between potentiality and actuality (if that is what he did) in an original and radical way that made any human relation to God wholly a matter of God's self-revelation.[54] It was probably his use of this distinction in connection with negative theology that laid the ground for subsequent Christian as well as Pagan[55] negative theologies.[56]

In the later Platonic tradition, with Albinus, Plotinus and Proclus in particular, we find negative theological language about the divine similar to that of Philo. Albinus (c. 150 AD) calls the first principle ineffable (ἄρρητος).[57] Middle- and Neo-Platonism also took over central Aristotelian concepts, ἀφαίρεσις, ἀπόφασις and στέρεσις, though not in their precise technical meanings.[58] Albinus also gives an important distinction between ἀφαίρεσις, ἀναλογία and ὑπεροχή.[59] The latter is usually best translated as preeminence, but becomes a central term for denoting transcendence. In explaining the meaning of abstraction Plotinus says that:

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51 Philo, *Specialibus Legibus* 1.48. See also Louth 1983, p. 21
52 Reynolds 1992, pp. 351–353
53 Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 1046a12, 1048a25
54 Louth 1983, p. 20
55 By 'Pagan' will be meant non-Judeo-Christian.
56 Wolfson 1986. This distinction is not inseparable from Judeo-Christian negative theologies, but it, or similar, is a very common way of explaining how God can be radically different from the creation, while simultaneously being present in creation.
57 Albinus, *Didaskalikos*
58 These terms abstraction, negation and privation were often simply taken to mean 'negation'. See below.
59 Celsus (2nd c. AD) uses ἀνάλυσις instead of ἀφαίρεσις, but it has the same function of clearly distinguishing between what belongs to a subject and what not. Daniélou 1973, pp. 340-341

> “Though we do not grasp Him by knowledge, we do not completely fail to grasp Him; we grasp Him enough to say something about Him, without, however, expressing Him himself; for we say what He is not, but what He is we do not say.”[60]

But in opposition to Philo and the subsequent Patristic tradition, in Plotinus knowledge or the 'vision' of God is not dependent upon revelation.[61] Moreover, the negative method in Plotinus, according to Mortley, is “[…]founded on that which there is of identity between levels: its object is simply the conceptual removal of the incomparable and the differentiated, so that the continuous may stand out.”[62] Hence in Plotinus the negative method does not imply an absolutely radical distinction between Creator and creation.

Jean Daniélou argues that for Judaism, God's transcendence is first of all a matter of the inability of created things to measure and comprehend what God is while simultaneously acknowledging that His existence can be known.[63] For the Platonist, the ineffability of God cannot be more than relative in the sense that God would be graspable if just the mind could free itself from all the conceptions of the sensible world.[64] In Gnosticism, however, God is unknown both essentially and existentially.[65] Hence, in the many sects of Gnosticism negative theology was used eagerly. For example in this passage from the *Tripartite Tractate* (unknown author), a (most likely) Valentinian work from the 3rd century:[66]

> “[…]nor can any work express him,
> nor can any eye see him,
> nor can any body grasp him,
> because of his inscrutable greatness,
> and his incomprehensible depth,
> and his immeasurable height,

60 Plotinus, *Ennead* 6.7.36
61 This can mean a crucial difference. Joseph Wissink has argued that we should distinguish between two kinds of negative (in his words “apophatic”) theology, the one Christian, the other Pagan. The first is based on revelation and thus assumes the radical distinction between Creator and creation, the other does not. Pagan negative theology evolved as a result of a growing skepticism, says Wissink. The gods became more and more 'abstract' and distant. But “[b]oth forms have in common that people speak explicitly about God and/or the gods: on one side the gods that disappear and on another the God who is near us, but remains God.” Wissink 2000, p. 118
62 Mortley 1984, p. 53
63 Daniélou 1973, pp. 335-336
64 Hence Plotinus writes that: “Things here are signs; they show therefore to the wiser teachers how the supreme God is known; the instructed priest reading the sign may enter the holy place and make real the vision of the inaccessible.” Plotinus, *Ennead* 6.9.11
65 Daniélou 1973, pp. 335-336
66 Edwards 2012, p. 101

and his illimitable will."[67]

The distinction between not knowing what God is and knowing that he is, is important and helps to distinguish between traditional Judeo-Christian negative theologies and more extreme kinds. As Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-390 AD) puts it subsequently to having argued for the ineffability of God:

> "Do not take our frankness as ground for atheistic caviling and exalt yourselves over against us for acknowledging our ignorance. Conviction, you see, of a thing's existence is quite different from knowledge of *what* it is."[68]

Though this distinction is to some degree defining for Christian negative theology, it does not mean that it is explicitly acknowledged in all Patristic sources. Sometimes a view closer to the Gnostic one is present, as when God's powers are also said to be ineffable.[69] But it is also a common idea, closer to the Platonic one, that God's goodness and wisdom can be seen in creation,[70] or that God is 'above' or 'beyond' comprehension in a way which tends to suggest a quantitative difference rather than a qualitative distinction between Creator and creation (as in, e.g., Origen at times).[71] Hence, though God cannot be directly known, in such thinking He can be known indirectly, through what we might talk of *theosemiosis*.[72]

Negative theology and imitation of God

We should notice how God's positive self-revelation in the history of salvation can hardly be taken out of account in negative theologies that are to be called 'Christian'. Karl Barth notes that the problem with philosophical negative descriptions of God is that they only go so far as the "limits of the incomprehensible, of that which is superior to us". Hence he argues that:

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67 *Tripartite Tractate* 54, tr. Attridge and Mueller, quoted from Mortley 1986.
68 *De Theologia* 28.5
69 For example Theophilus: "The appearance of God is ineffable (ἄρρητον) and indescribable (ἀνέκφραστόν)", Theophilus, *Ad Autolycus* 1.3. See below.
70 E.g., Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.24. This is arguably inspired by Plato's Timaeus. See Karamanolis 2013 (forthcoming). Or Gregory of Nyssa: "For it is possible to see Him who has made all things in wisdom by way of inference through the wisdom that appears in the universe." *Beat.*, 1264-1272
71 The term 'ἐπέκεινα' is often used to express that something is 'beyond' or 'above' in the sense of being transcendent. It is not always obvious, however, whether this is in a quantitative or qualitative sense. PGL, "ἐπέκεινα".
72 This concept has been developed especially by Michael Raposa. Inspired by C.S. Peirce, Raposa has argued that: "[...]the problem of religious knowledge is to be conceived primarily as a problem of sign-interpretation, that it is possible to discern a logic of such sign-interpretation, and that this is primarily the logic of abduction." Raposa 1989, p. 148. The concept '*theosemiosis*' refers to processes of thought that in some way or other bring out theological claims, ideas or notions from abductive reflection (non-inductive and non-deductive) on 'nature' or 'creation' (that which is not God).

> “If one says of God, “He is limitless, incomprehensible, free sovereign, eternal omnipotent, transcendent,” these expressions do not derive their exact meaning from an idea, from an abstraction, as if one wished to define the contrary of what is limited, comprehensible, and temporal. All these qualities draw their true meaning from the goodness of the heavenly Father, who has made himself our Father in Jesus Christ.”[73]

In other words, it is when God reveals himself positively in history, that he simultaneously reveals himself as incomprehensible. Thus such negative theology cannot be thought independently of a positive theological idea of the atonement. Our claim is that even if negative theology often seems to be developed independently of positive theological ideas of the works of Jesus Christ in history, these things come together in the ethical questions of what it means to be a Christian, not least as the idea of imitating God must refer to both the positive (historical) and negative (transcendent) aspects.[74]

Negative theology has consequences for ethics, most often through anthropological ideas where the human person is in some way said to reflect (actually or ideally) the divine essence and/or activities. A classical example is Plato’s concept of “likeness unto God as far as possible (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν)”[75] or the Neo-Pythagorean idea of being an “imitator of God (μιμητὴς Θεοῦ)”[76]. If to such ideas are added that God is simultaneously conceived as ineffable, incomprehensible or the like, we should expect such negative properties to have consequences for anthropology so that we can talk of a negative anthropology.[77] In the Patristic context, negative theology has an influence on anthropology through the idea that human beings are created in the image of God. This is our primary example of what we have called points of connection between theology and ethics (though the polemical use might also have an ethical significance it does not have so through any obvious points of connection in this sense). This notion in its many forms is what is traditionally called '*imago Dei*'. The idea of the human being as an *imago Dei* follows, e.g., from a traditional reading of Genesis 1:27. Combined with a negative theology this means that if human beings or humankind in general (an important difference, though maybe not so much in

73 Karl Barth 2002, p. 25. Wissink argues for similarities between dialectical theology and Patristic negative theology. Wissink 2000

74 This, however, should not be confused with the claim that the *apophatic* and the *kataphatic* ways always follow each other (as in Pseudo-Dionysius), if by this is meant that both speak in abstract terms about the transcendent. The positive always refers to history.

75 Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b

76 See Heintz 2004

77 See, e.g., Merki 1952; Annas 1999

this context) are/is created in, after, or according to (κἄτα) the image of God, and God must be essentially defined in negative terms, then so must humankind. Philo writes that,

> "[…]why should we wonder that the Existent cannot be apprehended by men when even the mind in each of us is unknown to us? For who knows the essential nature of the soul?"[78]

Almost perfectly similar statements can be found in, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, for whom this anthropology (especially his view of the soul) had obvious consequences for ethics. On the one hand Gregory frequently used the idea as an argument against such things as violence, power, inequality and slavery. Since humankind is made in the image of God such things mean doing violence to the very image of God. In these contexts it is not always very obvious that Gregory's negative theology has any direct impact.[79]

These consequences can most fundamentally be understood in terms of a relationship between the abstract and the concrete. The abstract will often have to do with the essence or nature of things or persons while the concrete will often have to do with the activities or works of a thing or a person. By the abstract we mean that which is removed (as in ἀφαίρεσις) or de-contextualized. By the concrete is meant that which can only be understood in its relation to other things or in a broader context (time or space). As practice, abstraction can take the form of an ideal of self-control, asceticism, and similar, while concretion can take the form of social ethics or a certain idea of a spiritual development according to one's relationship to others or a historical context. Our claim is that both aspects will very often be present in a form that might often look paradoxical.

In *The Epistle to Diognetus* this can be seen as Christians are said to be invisibly present in society while simultaneously imitating God (μιμητὴς … θεοῦ). In Clement of Alexandria it can be seen as the idea that the true Gnostic imitates the oneness of God while simultaneously imitating the love of the Logos for human beings (φιλανθρωπία). In Gregory of Nyssa the idea can be seen in so far as both abstraction and negation play a role in the virtuous person's spiritual progress, a progress that can only be described in positive definitions in so far as it is given expression in concrete circumstances (in following, ἀκολουθία). In all three examples different kinds of negative theology are combined with certain notions of history of salvation and the atonement.

78 Philo, *De Mutatione Nominum* 7.10, quoted from Louth 1981, p. 20

79 It could be argued that the idea of divine infinitude influences anthropology normatively. See the part on Gregory of Nyssa.

Theological ethics as *theologia viatorum*

A commonly used metaphor for the Christian life and theology is journeying. We find this in Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa and many others. For example the story of Abraham's journey into Canaan is by Gregory interpreted allegorically as a metaphor for the Christian life with its gradual, but never ending, experience of God's mysteries.[80] Also Moses' third theophany is interpreted in these terms in *On the Life of Moses*. This idea, in its many variations, seems to be grounded in a negative theology: If we cannot have any positive knowledge of God's essence, but only of his activities, no final systematic knowledge of God is possible. This is often coupled with some eschatological idea of hope or anticipation: We have not yet, and might never, gain a final comprehension of the divine, but through the continual use of negative theological methods we can at least retain an openness to the divine reality ahead, which, however, lies beyond our understanding. Such ideas are, of course, often associated with negative theology in a way that can be described not just as an *ad hoc*-argument, but as a *via negativa.*[81]

In Clement and Gregory this kind of thinking is arguably a result of an ontology where becoming plays a role that being cannot, in so far as we speak about creation and human beings in particular.[82] Only God is self-sufficient and creation only exists in so far as God continuously grants existence. In a way human beings cannot be like or imitate God but only continuously become like God, in action. In terms of ethics and epistemology this leads to a range of ideas that in different forms express the notion that the thinking subject, the human person, is always 'on the way'. From the perspective of ethics this unfolds in the idea of *epektasis,* a 'reaching out' which is often thought of as a constant progress in virtue (Gregory of Nyssa). In our generic definition the term *epektasis* will be somewhat related to this idea in a way that holds together negative theology and an idea of anticipation, hope, and some degree of moral progress (if not a more neutral idea of moral non-stability that is not, however, 'evil').

As a technical idea, *epektasis* is only developed after the Patristic period, but on the background of Patristic thinking, going back to Irenaeus.[83] Gregory of Nyssa

80 *ConEunII.*, p. 259

81 The concept *via negativa* often implies a more systematic and methodological idea of negative theology, as that developed by Pseudo-Dionysius. It cannot be simply identified with negative theology as such.

82 E.g., in terms of ὀυσία (being) or το εἶναι (to be) and γίγνεσθαι (to become). The idea that becoming is ontologically primary, so that being is an abstraction from becoming, is often associated with Heraclitus and in modern times, e.g., Nietzsche or process metaphysics and theology. Here we leave such fundamental issues aside since our theme is more specifically anthropological and ethical.

83 PGL, “ἐπεκτασις”, “ἐπεκτείν-ω”

derives this idea from Phil 3:13.[84] Both Clement of Alexandria and Origen refers and alludes to the same passage when discussing moral perfection. *Epektasis* means reaching after something that can never be possessed in any final way. Daniélou describes *epektasis* as follows:

> "There is at once for the soul an aspect of stability and possession, which is her participation in God, and an aspect of movement, which is the ever infinite gap between what she possesses of God and what He is […] Spiritual life is thus an everlasting transformation of the soul in Christ Jesus in the form of a growing ardour, thirst for God growing as participation in Him increases, which is accompanied by a growing stability, the soul becoming simple, and fixed ever more firmly in God."[85]

We will assume a minimalistic definition of the term (*epektasis* means reaching forward to the good, in some way), but throughout discuss how it can be deepened in relation to the central themes in our authors. We should be ready to add to our definition that *epektasis* is an activity in which the precedence of becoming over being produces a continuous, never-ending reaching forward to a perfection or a good that lies ahead, so that the present state is constantly, in each moment of time, negated for a future state (this negative element is important, though perhaps controversial).

The notion that the soul is in an "everlasting transformation" can be seen in theological reflection in general (not just theological ethics). In Gregory (and perhaps Clement) nothing in human existence is exempt from changeability, but nothing is exempt from continuous perfection either, then. Hence this is also true for epistemology and theology in general.

If the believer, and thus also the theologian, is always "on the way", then, in other words, such negative theology is often most adequately described as a *theologia viatorum*, a theology of the road or the pilgrim. H.L. Martensen defined the *theologia viatorum* as distinguished from the *theologia beatorum* as a matter of truth in distinction from adequacy:

> "We cannot have an adequate knowledge of God, that is, a knowledge co-extensive in every feature with its subject. Such a knowledge would be that vision of Him face to face, which cannot be ours till the last change is accomplished and everything partial shall have ceased. We can, however, have a true knowledge, that is, a knowledge true in principle, true in its

84 "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward (ἐπεκτεινόμενος) to what lies ahead". Phil 3:13, ESV

85 Daniélou 1944, pp. 305-307

> tendency, and true in the goal at which it aims;—true because it goes out from and leads to God. This distinction between a true and an adequate knowledge of God hovered before the minds of our elder theologians when they distinguished between a "*theologia viatorum et beatorum.*""[86]

By *theologia viatorum* (or the 'theology of the pilgrim') we should understand a theology that is true, but not adequate; true because it "goes out from and leads to God", inadequate because we cannot have a knowledge that is "co-extensive in every feature with its subject". Such a theology would be a *theologia beatorum*. Hence we see that according to this definition truth is not so much matter of correspondence between a proposition and reality,[87] as it is a matter of a 'movement' or a 'signification' that points in a certain direction. The ethical side to this is what we have called *epektasis* while the epistemological side might best be conceived in terms of a certain sem(e)iotic.[88]

When Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromata* insists on the continuous need to 'veil' the mysteries, and when the Cappadocians in their arguments against Eunomius claim that our conceptions about God are signs that point to, but do not, however, reveal the divine essence, we are arguably dealing with *theologia viatorum.* Why use this concept at all? The distinction '*viatorum et beatorum*' is, of course, only relevant in so far as we work with both. It is our claim now that we at least need this distinction as a heuristic tool as we reflect upon what methodologies will work as we approach negative theologies. We need to be able to find those methodologies that let us approach Patristic sources as works-in-progress rather than finished systems.

This must also be the case when working with theological ethics. We can have no final adequate vision of God, but must follow him indefinitely instead (this is not least the case in Gregory of Nyssa where God's infinity bars any adequate theological system). Granted the fundamental premises of negative theology, we can never have a final, adequate comprehension of God. There are at least two ways that this is also true of theological ethics. Firstly, if ethics are to some degree

86 Martensen 1904, p. 82

87 What is known as the 'correspondence theory of truth'. Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 1011b25, Plato, *Cratylus* 385b2, *Sophist* 263b. In modern times the theory was especially defended by Moore and Russell: "[...]a belief is true when there is a corresponding fact, and is false when there is no corresponding fact", Russell 1912, p. 129. Something akin to this idea is not surprisingly also present in Patristic theology, though the identification of truth with the person of Christ in the New Testament seems radically different. As we will see Gregory of Nyssa's negative theology leads him to a new idea of truth. Our definition of the concept *theologia viatorum* does not, however, depend on the ideas of truth explicitly present in our case studies, but only on what is speculatively feasible.

88 Spelling 'semeiotic' rather than 'semiotic' suggests a Peircean idea of signs. Liszka 1996

derived from our idea of God, then it will be subject to the same instability as theology as such. Secondly, if ethics are derived from an anthropology which is based on some sort of idea of *imago Dei,* then this anthropology will serve as a point of connection between negative theology and ethics. In both cases it will not be possible to formulate a closed ethical 'system': Because of negative theology, every true positive proposition about the nature of the good only becomes meaningful if related to negative truths about what the good is not, or what the not-good is. We only know God positively through his revelations and activities in concrete historical contexts. But theological ethics leads somewhere. It points beyond the present historical context. Hence it can be true, if not adequate.

If theological ethics from the perspective of negative theology cannot hope to have an 'adequate' but only a 'true' conception of God, so that theological ethics is always in a way a kind of *theologia viatorum*, then this means that we must be skeptical about perceiving such theology in terms of 'philosophical systems' or the like. Our project is, however, to point out the systematical relationship between certain ideas in our case studies. But on a meta-plane these ideas, so to speak, systematically bars theology from becoming a finalized system. Hence what we are looking for might be said to be a philosophical system, though one that is in development, not closed, not final. This means that when we consider our methodology, we must be aware of a range of approaches.

Methodology, scope and selection

By formulating a 'speculative' idea about the (possible) relationship between negative theology and moral epistemology, we to some degree have already decided on what we are looking for in our case studies. Hence our exposition of the ideas found in the authors is not 'neutral' or 'objective', but is a result of a process of pick-and-choose that is partly determined by our primary hypothesis. This hypothesis, however, is not fully developed beforehand, and must be continuously reconsidered throughout the exposition. It can easily be confused with many modern ideas about the difference between God and human beings.[89] That the idea must be developed processually is fully in line with our idea of theology. Hence the exposition of ideas in our case studies is also a part of a speculative process that seeks to establish the plausibility of our idea. We ask the reader to have this in mind.

In one sense what we are doing belongs to the genre known as 'the history of

89 E.g., Kierkegaard and 'dialectical theology'.

ideas'.[90] At least in so far as we are attempting to describe how the Judeo-Christian distinction as a more or less trans-historical idea unfolds in different philosophies in different historical contexts.[91] That the idea is often not explicitly stated in our sources only adds to this, since such an approach inevitable presupposes that authors can share a common (trans-historical) idea even if there is no obvious direct relation between the these. At least, we can say that different authors in different contexts have made similar retroductions from similar ideas. For example it has been common to infer from the idea of creation *ex nihilo* the hypothesis that God is qualitatively different from creation. We must acknowledge, however, that the idea cannot be abstracted from its concrete historical context(s) or at least that this is the only medium through which we can approach it.

Deciding whether or not to approach our subject ‘systematically’ or otherwise is crucial for how we read and understand the texts in question. The idea that philosophy is always (or ideally) a systematic way of thought has an important history as a historiographical concept.[92] Eighteen-century scholars, such as Jacob Brucker, were a main source for this view, claiming that philosophy basically attempts (or should attempt) to pose a single fundamental principle (or set of principles) from which it can deduce true doctrines (a 'system of philosophy') for the various brands of philosophical thought (ethics, epistemology etc.).[93] According to this methodology, philosophers of the past should be read as attempting to, more or less successfully, formulate such systems. Thus according to Brucker, historians of philosophy should attempt to expose the basic principles and (re-)establish the inherent philosophical systems of earlier philosophies, whether or not such systematical thought is explicitly present. This has arguably also affected the way theological history has been conducted since,[94] also in a way directly relevant for the present study. Hence Palmer has rightly noted that,

90 See Lovejoy 1936. According to Lovejoy the history of ideas is in a sense made up of building-blocks, the so-called 'unit-ideas', trans-historical individual concepts that combine in different ways throughout history, and which the historian of ideas identifies. We are not here taking over any strong notion of 'unit ideas' or similar, but nevertheless recognize that the 'Judeo-Christian distinction' and negative theology can at least to some degree be thought of as trans-historical 'unit-ideas'.

91 The 'Judeo-Christian' distinction arguably has similar consequences in widely different contexts. For example, when discussing Karl Barth's early (dialectical) theology, Balthasar argued that “[d]ialectical theology is expressly designed as a theology for a journeying People of God who are merely on their way to God but not there: a theologia viatorum[...]”. The reasons for this are much the same as ours, when dealing with Patristic negative theology. Balthasar 1992, p. 79

92 See Catana 2008

93 A form of what is known today as epistemological foundationalism.

94 Though of course systematical scholasticism in the Church goes as far back as at least John of Damascus (c. 675-749), who attempted to systematize previous Patristic thought. John of Damascus, *Expositio Fidei*

> “[w]hen modern scholars have given attention to the apologists' use of negative theology, they have frequently fitted it into a systematic framework, which is not in keeping with the method and purpose of the apologists themselves.”[95]

An example of this is when Clement of Alexandria is taken to be the first Christian author to apply negative theology systematically.[96] This might reflect a too system-oriented view of what it means to do negative theology. The problem with this can, not least, be that examples of negative theology that do not fit into a 'systematical' way of doing theology, are left out. There is a risk that we misinterpret the apologetic use of negative theology if we read such texts solely with a systematic or dogmatic framework in mind. This risk is especially prevalent when searching for the historical roots of doctrines, not least ethical ones, since these are often formulated in relation to concrete problems in certain social contexts. While a systematical view can still be methodologically useful if we aim to distinguish systematical from non-systematical thought, it is clearly deficient if the aim is to actually present the varieties of negative theology and their use adequately, in their own right.

This is why we should also take other methodologies into account. Quentin Skinner argued against 'the myth of coherence', the idea that the historian of philosophy should attempt to find an underlying coherent system of thought beneath a philosopher's *oeuvre*, even if it seems to be incoherent or self-contradictory from work to work.[97] Instead we need a view on philosophical thought that takes 'performativity' seriously. We need to ask what a specific philosopher was doing, and why, when writing or saying specific things. Hence we should look for the author's intentions, typically in terms of speech act theory. With a commonly used term, we will call this alternative to the systematic approach 'intentionalism'.

Though Skinner developed his methodology in relation to political philosophy, there can be no doubt that intentionality is central when working with negative theologies. Wissink writes that:

> “When we want to describe philosophical thinking as 'negative theology' we must question the intentionality of that thinking. Does the thinker want to

95 Palmer mentions Donaldson 1866 as an example. Palmer 1983, p. 236

96 See, e.g., Mortley 1986; Hägg 2006. It is not obvious that Clement's negative theology differs radically from previous ones, except in quantity.

97 Against Skinner, Mark Bevir argues that while the desires that govern some speech acts only have a thin coherency requirement, the beliefs that govern most speech acts are subordinated to a firmer coherency requirement. To understand something as the expression of a belief implies an expectation that this belief is coherent. See Bevir 1997.

> eliminate the gods or God to make room for the true secret of reality? Has something of the secret that we call 'God' been shown to the thinker and does his or her thinking circle around it? If so, the rejection of closed systems is positively motivated by the desire to keep reality open to what transcends it."[98]

Wissink's point is that there can be different forms and functions of negative theology that are not discernible, however, from particular negative theological utterances in themselves and that Pagan and Christian forms of negative theology can take the form of each other without necessarily sharing the same aim.[99] We cannot at face value identify specimens of negative theology with, on the one hand, "the conceptual removal of the incomparable and the differentiated, so that the continuous may stand out"[100] or, on the other, an attempt to guard the distinction "between God and everything". Hence, e.g., the claim 'God is not visible' does not in itself tell us what kind of negative theology is presupposed. This means that we should be able to look at, e.g., seemingly philosophical and speculative thought as potentially not very speculative or philosophical after all, and *vice versa*. Since negative theology is a way (a method or practice) of speaking indirectly, understanding the context of negative theological statements seems particularly important.[101] Negative definitions are radically open propositions, and the reference of names made from such can be quite indefinite.[102] A grasp of context and the author's intentions are crucial for understanding the full meaning of negative theological utterances. For example, taken as an implicit moral imperative 'this is not God' can, by itself, simply mean that 'this' is not to be worshiped, but without telling us what to worship instead, or whether to worship anything at all.[103] Similarly, whether or not a proposition counts as a simple negation, or indirectly points beyond what it negates, seems not only to depend on the context, but also on the intention of the speaker (the context might only serve

98 Wissink 2000, p. 118

99 This was arguably the result of the introduction of foreign logics into texts, what Hadot calls 'borrowing' (Hadot mentions Ambrose's introduction of Origenian mysticism into an ascetical and ontological system derived from Plotinus), or the adoption of the ideas and behaviors of adversaries, 'contamination'. Hadot 1965

100 Mortley 1984, p. 53

101 In a way we are dealing with a kind of 'holism' since indirect references to a thing are always dependent on its relation to a larger whole, whether negatively or not. For a discussion of holism of reasons see Dancy 2004, McKeever & Ridge 2006.

102 Not least when of the *apohatic* form in the Aristotelian sense. See Mortley 1981, p. 10

103 A parallel can be found in Skinner's discussion of irony. Understanding ironic utterances implies understanding the intention behind the utterance. Not because irony changes the meaning of a proposition, but because understanding irony as an illocutionary act depends on understanding the intention behind the utterance. Skinner 2002, pp. 111-112

as what we might call a contingent enabler according to holistic theories of reasons).[104]

Hence, e.g., Mortley's distinction between anti-anthropomorphism and truly negative (*apophatic*) theology, is too rigid.[105] Whether or not a claim that God does not, e.g., have a body like human beings is an instance of a simple anti-anthropomorphism or a more thorough-going negative theology depends on the context. Identifying a theological utterance as negative theology requires some idea of the intention of the utterance as well as the framework of ideas in which this utterance is based.

Of course, intentions might not always be fully developed in the formulation of thoughts and doctrines. Intentions often evolve in a dialogical interplay with the formulated doctrines and the subject(s) formulating them.[106] In moral philosophical contexts the intentionalistic view is particularly problematic since, as Talbot Brewer argues, practice (including ethical reflection) is often construed around what he calls 'dialectical activities'. Such aim at an intrinsic goodness that is more or less 'opaque', but incrementally self-revealing as the practice is engaged in.[107] Hence intentions are not (always or mostly not) propositional attitudes. Moreover, intentions can be quite indefinite and often develop historically and can be hard to distinguish from motives.[108] All this suggests that we cannot abstract the limited context of a negative theological utterance (say a sermon or an apologetic situation) from its broader historical context.

While we perhaps cannot assume an underlying coherent system in a philosopher's thought, we could at least assume that an author's philosophical activity is part of an attempt to render practice coherent.[109] In other words, when an author tries 'to do' something with a speech act, the intention is (or might be) regulated by an ideal of practical coherency. This means that a given set of philosophical doctrines extracted from a philosopher's writings does not need to fit together in a philosophical system in order to be viable, but it would still be

104 See, e.g., Dancy 2004

105 Mortley 1986, p. 17

106 Hence the idea that the intentions of the author does not determine the meaning of the text, at least not fully. A text to some degree 'writes itself'.

107 Brewer, 2009, p. 39. Brewer illustrates his notion of dialectical activities with reference to Augustine, and Gregory of Nyssa's concept of *epektasis*, never-ending progress in virtue.

108 For example we might ask whether Gregory of Nyssa intended to convert Eunomius, defend his brother Basil or to develop a theory of language or a systematic defense of trinitarianism when he engaged in the polemicism against Neo-Arianism. All might be true, of course (though some of these things are rather motives than intentions), but Gregory himself might not have had any clear idea of what he was doing.

109 Practice can be understood as a 'world' which action attempts to render coherent. See Oakeshott 1933

possible to view them as parts of a broader practical coherency. To use the terminology from Witttgenstein and Austin, we should at least assume that agents, when performing speech acts, do not suddenly change the rules of language games and the use of concepts, but try to keep some degree of consistency.

Another possibility compatible with this idea is that we approach philosophy from the perspective of biography where the 'philosophical persona' is central.[110] The biographical approach answers to some of the objections made above. It is wider than the intentionalistic approach, though it takes account of the intentions of an author. But it also takes account of the context that shapes these intentions as they develop. For example, we should expect a certain 'feedback' effect when negative theological statements are made in a polemical context. These statements, though being a part of a practical-polemical context, tend to affect an author's basic theoretical presuppositions, which again reshapes the way future statements are made.[111] We need to take seriously that late antique thinkers did not share the modern skepticism towards biography, Diogenes Laërtius being just one example.[112] This is also the case for the understanding of ethics.[113]

The question of how negative theology affects ethics in general is too extensive for a study of the present kind, especially if analyzed historically. If nothing more, the many examples above should prove that. Hence to achieve both depth and consistency the present study will focus narrowly on the use of negative theology and the influence of such on the views on the possibility of ethics in a few authors. Firstly there is *The Epistle to Diognetus* (by an unknown, probably 2nd century author). The point in this short text is pretty straight forward with its claims that God is invisible and does not need anything. This leads to a polemicism against Pagan and Jewish modes of worship, but also the claim that Christians are invisibly present in the world while imitating God. It is especially the latter claim we will discuss.

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110 See Hadot 1995. The biographical approach to the history of philosophy was one of the methods that suffered most hardly from the attacks made by Brucker and other proponents of the systematic approach.

111 For example when Gregory of Nyssa used negative theology against the theological positivism of Eunomius the ideas developed arguably inspired Gregory's own thought in later works, in a way he had not himself foreseen.

112 Diogenes Laërtius, *Vitae Philosophorum*

113 When Gregory of Nyssa developed his philosophy partly through biographies (most famously in *On the Life of Moses* and *The Life of Macrina*), this view on ethics was arguably a contributing factor. In Gregory, following (ἀκολουθία) does hardly mean to follow specific rules or ethical principles. Fellowship with God is “a living fact (τὴν ζωὴν ἐνεργήσας)”. *Cat.* 35, p. 502. That someone like Gregory used the biographical approach does of course not mean that we should necessarily adopt this. That would be to mix up planes of thought. In the final part we will discuss, however, how a conception of ethics as biography can use elements in our case studies.

Secondly there is Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata.* In this work Clement lays works through a multitude of philosophical questions. During his deliberately confusing discussions he touches upon themes such as negative theology and ethics. These will be attempted abstracted and their relations discussed.

Thirdly there is Gregory of Nyssa. We will discuss elements from most of his philosophical career. But it is especially his polemics against Neo-Arianism and its consequences for his late work *On the Life of Moses* we will focus on. Though it was especially developed during his arguments against Eunomius, his negative theology is not only polemical but also grounded in “the Biblical perspective” (Maspero), with a self-revealing God at the center. But at times, especially in the ascetic works, Gregory sounds more Neo-Platonic than biblical. So we actually have a variety of negative theologies present in his thinking. It is our job to sort things out and see the links between the different forms negative theology takes and Gregory's ethical views.

These examples will be used as possible paradigms of how negative theology developed and influenced ethics in the first four centuries. Of course this will be far from enough to paint a general picture of how negative theology evolved. Rather the claim is the more specific that the three tend to be good paradigmatic examples of how different negative theologies are related to different (meta-)ethics.

To understand the mechanisms at play in the texts we need to have a firm grip on context, as has been argued above. This means that even if our focus is on negative theology and its relation to meta-ethics, then a range of other subjects need to be thought through. In the case of *The Epistle to Diognetus,* we especially need to consider the etymological and historical backgrounds for the concepts used in metaphors, as when the Christians in the world are likened to the soul in the body. In the case of Clement we need to consider how his negative theology and ethics relate to other topics in the *Stromata.* In the case of Gregory, apologetic, polemical as well as dogmatic and ethical statements from his earlier corpora at large will be treated. This will take the form of an historical analysis of the development in his thought, especially during the Eunomian controversies, and the consequences of this for his later views on negative theology and (meta-)ethics.

Different forms of negative theology can take the form of each other, not least in pragmatic contexts: In polemics, homilies or ethical exhortations and treatises. In such texts, though one takes the Judeo-Christian distinction for granted, one can apply different forms of negative theology from a range of philosophical schools

(the usual example being Middle- and Neo-Platonism), whether consciously or not. Using different kinds in a polemical context especially seems a likely strategy in a cultural context that generally does not provide a philosophical vocabulary expressive of God's radical difference from creation. Especially in apologetic Platonic philosophy proved to be an effective instrument, and an apparent ally, against Pagan religion and mythology.

The differences between our three cases mean that we must approach these with different methodologies. While a biographical and intentionalistic approach might seem fitting with Gregory of Nyssa, this is not the case for *The Epistle to Diognetus* since the author is unknown. With Clement of Alexandria this is to some degree also the case, since we do not know much about his life. It is obvious however that much of his thinking was developed in opposition to gnosticism. The overall approach is somewhat systematic, but only in a way that acknowledges the fact that none of the thinking discussed contains a closed philosophical system.

The diversities of negative theology in the early Church

We will now discuss a variety of passages from early Patristic literature that to some degree convey seeds of negative theological thinking. This will in no way be a fully adequate exposition of the tradition but only a quick overview.

As negative theology was applied in different traditions things grew more complex. As we follow history it becomes increasingly obvious that we need to distinguish between different forms of negative theology. A technical negative vocabulary can rarely be found in any fully developed form, not even in such a figure as Gregory of Nyssa whose writings contain extensive reflections on linguistics, logic and ontology. But the use of negative definitions, methods and strategies are present from early on in Church history.

The New Testament

According to our broad generic definition the New Testament can be said to contain specimens of negative theology.[114] Obvious candidates are examples from the gospel of John, e.g. “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”[115] and Paul, 1 Tim 6:16, “[T]he King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.” The first epistle of John contains an often

114Rocca lists the following references to New Testament in which he believes to find negative theology in a broad sense: Rom 1:20, Col 1:15, 2 Cor 12:4, 2 Cor 9:15, Rom 11:33, Ep 3:8, 1 Tim 6:16. Rocca 2004, pp. 8-9

115Jn 1:18, ASV

referenced example: “No man hath beheld God at any time: if we love one another, God abideth in us, and his love is perfected in us”.[116] Indeed this could often be the motto for many negative theologies, in so far as they are driven by the belief that God is essentially ineffable, incomprehensible and so on, on the one hand, while his works and actions are discernible through his revelation on the other. The ethical consequence is that the former cannot in any comprehensive way be imitated, while the latter can. The result is a double ethics and moral epistemology, negative with regards to essential ontology, positive with regards to action. As we will see this structure is discernible in a range of ethics based on negative theology.

We can also find many examples of polemical and apologetic uses of negative theology. Paul's famous speech to the Athenians might be categorized as negative theology, though the context is obviously apologetic:

> “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”[117]

It is of course not at all obvious that this is an instance of negative theology in the sense described above. What is important about this passage is, however, that it was received and used as an instance of negative theology in Patristic thought (e.g. in Clement of Alexandria). It is not obvious that his statements are instances of negative theology *per se.* Paul’s claim could just as well be understood as saying that the Athenians’ belief that God is unknown is false, and as such as the opposite of negative theology. But Paul does not say, e.g., that the Athenians very well know God and should stop calling him unknown, but he accepts the statement on the altar and uses it for his own rhetorical purposes. Whether or not this was a clever rhetorical use of material at hand or a sincere claim about the religiosity (or superstition) of the Athenians,[118] Paul's use of a reference to an 'unknown God' uses negative definitions in speaking about God. Indirectly Paul says something about the Athenians' lack of knowledge about God until a present point in time, in order to be able to present his own positive account.

In a later apologetic context, negative theological statements often have a polemical function. Often negative theology was used as a means against a too speculative approach to faith. But fairly early on we also see examples of a more philosophical negative theology.

1161 Jn 4:12, ASV
117Acts 17:22-23, NIV
118Acts 17:22

Justin Martyr

Except for Paul (granted the above), Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) might have been the first Patristic author to have used negative theology in an apologetical (though more polemical) context. Justin complains that Pagan idols, being made of corruptible material, are "[...]insulting to God, who, having ineffable glory and form, thus gets His name attached to things that are corruptible[...]"[119]. But Justin also uses the term in a more 'dogmatic' context, e.g. when speaking of Christ: "And that the Spirit of prophecy might signify to us that He who suffers these things has an ineffable origin, and rules His enemies, He spake thus: 'His generation who shall declare?[...]" (Isa. 53:8). Christ, the Word, is by Justin described as "a power (δύναμίς) of the ineffable (ἀρρήτου) Father".[120] In his discussion of baptism (illumination) Justin paradoxically claims that when a person is baptized "the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe" is pronounced over him by "he who leads to the laver", but that "no one can utter the name of the ineffable God; and if any one dare to say that there is a name, he raves with a hopeless madness."[121]

In Justin it is primarily the idea of divine ineffability that makes him an example of negative theological thinking. But at times Justin connects the theme of God's ineffability with a broader framework of negative descriptions:

> "[...]you must not imagine that the unbegotten (ἀγέννητον) God Himself came down or went up from any place. For the ineffable (ἄρρητος) Father and Lord of all neither has come to any place, nor walks, nor sleeps, nor rises up, but remains in His own place, wherever that is, quick to behold and quick to hear, having neither eyes nor ears, but being of indescribable (ἀλέκτῳ) might [...] neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor Jacob, nor any other man, saw the Father and ineffable (ἄρρητον) Lord of all, and also of Christ, but [saw] Him who was according to His will His Son, being God[...]"[122]

Justin refers to God as the "unbegotten and ineffable God".[123] Unbegottenness/ungeneracy and ineffability are the concepts that establish Justin's negative theology. At times it even seems that unbegottenness is the ontological quality from which God's ineffability follows. In his perhaps most articulate negative theological discourse, Justin about the names of God famously notes that:

> "But to the father of all, who is unbegotten there is no name given. For by

119Justin, *Apologia Prima* 9, p. 190
120Justin, *Apologia Secunda* 10
121Justin, *Apologia Prima* 61
122Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 127, p. 263
123See also Justin, *Apologia Secunda* 13

> whatever name He be called, He has as His elder the person who gives Him the name.[124] But these words Father, and God, and Creator, and Lord, and Master, are not names (ὀνόματά), but appelations (προσρήσεις) derived from his good deeds (εὐποιϊῶν) and functions (ἔργων). And His Son, who alone is properly called Son, the Word, who also was with Him and was begotten before the works, when at first He created and arranged all things by Him, is called Christ, in reference to His being anointed and God's ordering all things through Him; this name itself also containing an unknown significance (ἄγνωστον σημασίαν); as also the appelation "God" is not a name, but an opinion (δόξα) implanted in the nature of men of a thing that can hardly be explained."[125]

Notice that even the name 'Christ' contains an "unknown significance". With this claim Justin prefigures Clement's theory of veiling where Christ simultaneously reveals and veils the divine mysteries. In his claim that the appellations for God are derived from his "deeds and functions", rather than names for God himself, Justin arguably affirms the important distinction between οὐσία and ἐνέργεια, which becomes prominent especially with the Cappadocians, even if he does not use those concepts explicitly. As noted above, as applied within the tradition of negative theology, this distinction typically means that God's essence (οὐσία) can only be described in negative definitions, while His works (ἐνέργεια) can be described both positively and negatively.

Aristides of Athens

In the apology of Aristides of Athens (2nd century) negative theology is used for polemic purposes. But there are short passages where ontology and epistemological ideas and arguments are developed. Hence Aristides says that:

> "I say, then, that God is not born, not made, an ever-abiding nature without beginning and without end, immortal, perfect, and incomprehensible. Now when I say that he is "perfect," this means that there is not in him any defect, and he is not in need of anything but all things are in need of him. And when I say that he is "without beginning," this means that everything which has beginning has also an end, and that which has an end may be brought to an end. He has no name, for everything which has a name is kindred to things created. Form he has none, nor yet any union of members; for whatsoever possesses these is kindred to things fashioned."[126]

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124 Mortley calls this idea that a name is always given by a "parent" a "Philonic principle", where to name something means being in some respect superior to it. Mortley 1986, p. 133. There is arguably a biblical point in this, e.g., as the sin of Babylon in Gen 11:4, is that the builders want to "make a name for" themselves which can be taken to mean gaining independence.

125 Justin, *Apologia Secunda* 6, p. 190

126 Aristides, *Apologia Prima*, p. 264

Hence we see how God's difference from “things created” is what grounds negative theology. The idea that God is simple (not composed) seems to be derived from this.

Tatian

Similar to Justin is Tatian (c. 120-180) who in his apology writes that,

> “Our God did not begin to be in time: He alone is without beginning (ἄναρχος), and He Himself is the beginning of all things. God is a Spirit, not pervading matter, but the Maker of material spirits, and of the forms that are in matter; He is invisible (ἀόρατός), impalpable (ἀναφής), being Himself the Father of both sensible and invisible things. Him we know from His creation, and apprehend (καταλαμβανόμεθα) His invisible power by His works (τοῖς ποιήμασι).”[127]

Tatian's reasoning is the traditional that we can know the existence of God through his works, but not what God is himself. Tatian immediately adds that as a result of this God should not be given offerings: “Nor even ought the ineffable (ἀνωνόμαστον) God to be presented with gifts; for He who is indeficient (ἀνενδεὴς) is not to be misrepresented by us as though He were indigent.”[128] Thus there is an obvious (negative) practical consequence of Tatian's negative theology.

Preaching of Peter

Another work from the second century is (probably) the apocryphal Preaching of Peter, quoted by Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromata*. This text is known primarily from Clement. Its dating is uncertain, but since we know it from Clement it is not newer than the late second century. Though we do not know much about its origin, it presents a fairly clear example of early negative theology:

> “Know then that there is one God, who made the beginning of all things, and holds the power of the end; and is the Invisible (ὁ ἀόρατος), who sees all things; uncontainable (ἀχώρητος), who contains all things; indeficient (ἀνεπιδεής), whom all things need, and by whom they are; incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτος), incorruptible (ἄφθαρτος), unmade (ἀποίητος), who made all things by the ‘Word of His power,’”[129]

As in Philo, Clement and others, what is central in this fragment is especially the relation between God's indeficiency (need of nothing), his invisibility and incomprehensibility.

127Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 4.2
128 Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, p. 66, modified.
129*Str.* 6.5.39.3, modified

Theophilus

Of a bit later dating, something similar to Justin and the Preaching of Peter can be found in Theophilus (d. ca. 181-185) who writes in his apology to the learned Pagan Autolycus that,

> "The appearance of God is ineffable (ἄρρητον) and indescribable (ἀνέκφραστόν), and cannot be seen by eyes of flesh. For in glory He is uncontainable (δόξῃ γάρ ἐστιν ἀχώρητος), in greatness incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτος), in height inconceivable (ἀπερινόητος), in power incomparable, in wisdom unrivalled, in goodness inimitable (ἀμίμητος), in kindness indescribeable (ἀνεκδιήγητος). For if I say He is Light, I name but His own work; if I call Him Word, I name but His sovereignty; if I call Him Mind, I speak but of His wisdom; if I say He is Spirit, I speak of His breath; if I call Him Wisdom, I speak of His offspring;[...]"[130]

As Justin, Theophilus applies the (Philonic) distinction between God and His activities/works. Theophilus goes on the explain that though God cannot be seen by the eyes and though his glory is ineffable, he can be perceived through his works.[131] Notice that Theophilus calls God 'inimitable' in goodness, something which could suggest a problem for ethics. As we will see in both Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa this problematic is fleshed out in an (apparent) paradox between negative theology and the demand to follow Christ.

Irenaeus and Gnosticism

As noted above, negative theology played a prominent roles in strands of Gnosticism. In our context this is primarily of interest in so far as orthodox authors related to Gnosticism.[132] In Irenaeus the term 'unnameable' is primarily used when he refers to the thought system of the Gnosticists: "They maintain, then, that in the invisible (ἀοράτοις) and unnameable (ἀκατονομάστοις) heights above there exists a certain perfect, pre-existent Æon, whom they call Proarche, Propator, and Bythus[...]".[133] Amongst his opponents is Marcus who according to Irenaeus talks about "the invisible and unnameable (ἀκατονομάστων) regions above"[134] and who has claimed that "the unoriginated, inconceivable (ἀνεννόητος) Father, who is without material substance (ἀνούσιος)[...] willed to bring forth that which is ineffable (ἄῤῥητον) to Him"[135]. Notice the strong claim allegedly made by the

130Theophilus, *Apologia ad Autolycum* 1.3, p. 89, modified.
131Theophilus, *Apologia ad Autolycum* 1.5
132The question of 'orthodoxy' is only relevant, however, in so far as it is useful for establishing the context of the works of Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa.
133Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.1.1, p. 316, modified
134Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.13.1
135Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.7.6

Valentinians that God is insubstantial (ἀνούσιος). The Valentinians maintain, Irenaeus notes, “that they alone are acquainted with these ineffable and unknown mysteries”.[136] Against those who “allege that those things which are super-celestial and spiritual” are types of another pleroma, Irenaeus argues that when they claim that “God is the image of another Father” they make “their imaginations range beyond God, they having in their hearts surpassed the Master Himself, being indeed in idea elated and exalted above [Him], but in reality turning away from the true God.”[137] Irenaeus does seem to agree that these “super-celestial and spiritual” things are invisible and ineffable and he in another place also uses the term “the ineffable Father” in reference to the true God.[138] Hence ‘unnameability’ is not reserved to the vocabulary of his opponents. But it is in his use of an idea of incomprehensibility and immeasurability that Irenaeus proves able to use negative theology even though his polemics are against opponents who in some aspects had made negative theology their own form of thought.

> “As Scripture itself suggests, one may justly ask the heretics, How high above God do you lift up your imaginations, you rashly elated people? You have heard that the heavens are measured in the palm of his hand [Isa 40:12]: tell me the measure, and recount the endless number of cubits, explain to me the fulness— the breadth, length, height, beginning and end of the measurement. The human mind cannot understand or comprehend them, for the heavenly treasuries are great. God cannot be measured in the heart, and he is incomprehensible by the mind; he holds the earth in the hollow of his hand. Who can measure his right hand? Who even knows his finger? Who understands his hand— that hand which encompasses immensity; that hand which, by its own measure, spreads out the whole of the heavens and which enfolds the earth with all its abysses in its palm? […] But if no human being can comprehend the fulness and the greatness of his hand, how will anyone be able to understand or know in his heart so great a God?”[139]

Notice also that Irenaeus analogizes negative properties from creation to Creator when he claims that we do not understand the measurement of the heavens and subsequently uses this statement when claiming that God himself cannot be understood. Tactics against Gnosticism similar to Irenaeus’ can be found in Clement of Alexandria whose negative theology we will briefly discuss.

136Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 2.14. What the exact philosophy of Marcus and the Valentinians consisted in is less relevant here – what is interesting is how Irenaeus tackles his opponents.
137Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.34
138Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.34
139Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.19.2, p. 112

Clement of Alexandria

The first attempt at a (at face value) more systematic use of negative theology is probably Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215). Clement of Alexandria was far from being the first Christian author to use Hellenic philosophy (as is well known, Hellenic language and models of thought can be found in the earliest Christian literature). In an important passage Clement writes that,

> "No one can rightly express Him wholly. For on account of His greatness (μεγέθει) He is ranked as the All, and is the Father of the universe (τῶν ὅλων πατήρ). Nor are any parts to be predicated of Him. For the One is indivisible (ἀδιαίρετον γὰρ τὸ ἕν); wherefore also it is infinite (ἄπειρον), not considered with reference to inexhaustability (ἀδιεξίτητον), but with reference to its being without dimensions (ἀδιάστατον), and not having a limit (μὴ ἔχον πέρας). And therefore it is without form (ἀσχημάτιστον) and name (ἀνωνόμαστον). [...] It remains that we understand, then, the Unknown (ἄγνωστον), by divine grace, and by the word alone that proceeds from Him; as Luke in the Acts of the Apostles relates that Paul said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For in walking about, and beholding the objects of your worship, I found an altar on which was inscribed, To the Unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.""[140]

Here Clement grounds his negative theology in God's qualitative infinity and lack of dimension, i.e. his radical transcendence.[141] God is identified with the One of Pythagoreanism or the Platonic 'Parmenides'. Clement's reference to Paul's speech to the Athenians is also interesting. Paul's statements about an "unknown God" might in themselves only loosely be associated with negative theology. But they were certainly understood as instances of negative theology (though not using the term) by later generations.

Clement's claims were not new. Much of it is reminiscent of Philo, and as we have seen the claim that no predicates can be given to God because all predicates depend on higher principles is reminiscent of Justin's more metaphorical statement that "[God] has as His elder the person who gives Him the name."[142] What is more original about Clement is how he connects these themes in his use of negative theology as a philosophical method, a *via negativa* to use a later terminology. Clement's whole concept of faith and knowledge is influenced by his negative

140*Str.* 5.12.81-82, pp. 463-464, modified. We will deal with this passage in more detail later.

141Whether Clement believed God to be qualitatively infinite is a matter of controversy (see, e.g., Mühlenberg 1966), infinity in this passage seems to be what qualifies all other negative predicates that Clement ascribes to God.

142Justin, *Apologia Secunda* 6, p. 190

theology which means that it influenced his whole theological 'system'.

Tertullian

Clement is often compared to his contemporary Tertullian who at times uses negative theology in a way much similar to Clement, but for much more 'anti-philosophical' purposes. Tertullian (c. 160-225) is most famous for his polemical question, “what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”,[143] usually taken as meant to express the incompatibility of philosophy and theology. The interesting thing about Tertullian is that he applied what we would often consider somewhat philosophical arguments to establish this contradiction:

> “That which is infinite is known only to itself (*quod vero inmensum est, soli sibi notum est*). This it is which gives some notion of God, while yet beyond all our conceptions (*Hoc quod est, deum aestimari facit, dum aestimari non capit*)—our very incapacity of fully grasping Him affords us the idea of what He really is. He is presented to our minds in His transcendent greatness, as at once known and unknown.”[144]

The ‘philosophical’ premise here is, to be sure, the claim that God is infinite. The idea that the divine is infinite is somewhat peculiar to Christian philosophy, with a few exceptions (e.g. Anaximander’s 'ἄπειρον'). Hence also Clement of Alexandria used notions of infinity to establish his negative theology. It is not clear from this passage what Tertullian means by 'infinite'. The term is arguably used *ad hoc* to establish incomprehensibility.

Origen?

In the East, especially in Alexandria, Clement’s use of philosophy inspired a long tradition. Best known in the pre-Nicene age is probably Clement’s student Origen (c. 185-254). Origen writes that,

> “God is incomprehensible, and incapable of being measured. For whatever be the knowledge which we are able to obtain of God, either by perception or reflection, we must of necessity believe that He is by many degrees far better than what we perceive Him to be. For, as if we were to see any one unable to bear a spark of light, or the flame of a very small lamp, and were desirous to acquaint such a one, whose vision could not admit a greater degree of light than what we have stated, with the brightness and splendour of the sun, would it not be necessary to tell him that the splendour of the sun was unspeakably and incalculably better and more glorious than all this light which he saw? [...] But among all intelligent, that is, incorporeal

143Tertullian, *De Praescriptione* 7
144Tertullian, *Apologeticus pro Christianis* 17, p. 32

> beings, what is so superior to all others—so unspeakably and incalculably superior—as God, whose nature cannot be grasped or seen by the power of any human understanding, even the purest and brightest?”[145]

It is not surprising that Origen’s use of ‘light’-metaphors is reminiscent of Plato (e.g. the sun in the *Republic*).[146] Origen expands the analogy to mean that as our eyes cannot look upon the sun itself, we can behold its light “through windows or some small openings” and thereby come to reflect upon its greatness. As is common in authors influenced by Platonism, nature reflects the beauty of the intellectual forms. In Origen it seems that the incomprehensibility of God first of all follows from the fact that He is ‘more’. It is as if human intelligence can only grasp objects of a certain scale and that God surpasses that scale.

It is somewhat disputed to what degree Origen conceived of God as ‘infinite’. It has been argued that for Origen God is limited, not by any opposing reality, but by his own perfection.[147]

> “[…]we must not be deterred by the pretext of piety from the assertion of its limitation. For if the divine power were infinite, it would necessarily by incapable of self-knowledge; for in the nature of things the infinite is incomprehensible. So God made as many beings as he could grasp and control and keep under his providence.”[148]

It has further been argued that the finitude of God was a necessary constituent in Origen's view that the fall happened when souls grew tired (κορός) of contemplating God.[149] But Panagiōtēs Tzamalikos has pointed out that Origen at times explicitly conceives of God as essentially infinite,[150] and that this claim was closely related to the claim that God is beyond knowledge (finite knowledge only applies to that which is finite).[151] Against Celsus, Origen said on Plato's statement in Timaeus 28c (on the difficulty of finding out and expressing the Creator) that the Christians “[…]maintain that human nature is in no way sufficient for the search for God, or for finding him in an unsullied way unless aided by Him who is being sought.”[152] Hence even if it is true that Origen did not conceive of the difference between Creator and the human mind as radically as did others, he did hold some

145Origen, *De Principiis* 1.1.5-6, p. 243
146Plato, *Politeia*
147Woody 1998, p. 120
148Origen, *De Principiis* 2.9.1-6, p. 163-70, Koetschau's edition of frag. 24 from Justinian.
149Heine stresses this point in his discussion of Gregory of Nyssa. See, e.g., Heine 1975
150Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.77
151Tzamalikos 2006, p. 246
152Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.42, quoted from Mortley 1986, p. 82

sort of revelation theology, where divine grace is needed.[153]

Cyril of Jerusalem

Negative theology did not just have a polemical and apologetic use, but also a homiletic (in preaching and sermons addressed to a community of believers). Homilies often contained both, so there is not a sharp distinction. When found in a homiletic context, negative theological statements tend to have a less technical character than in the more philosophical use. When for example the archbishop Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313-386) noted that,

> "[...]though the mind is most rapid in its thoughts, yet the tongue needs words, and a long recital of intermediary speech. For the eye embraces at once a multitude of the 'starry quire;' but when any one wishes to describe them one by one, which is the Morning-star, and which, the Evening-star, and which each one of them, he has need of many words. In like manner again the mind in the briefest moment compasses earth and sea and all the bounds of the universe; but what it conceives in an instant, it uses many words to describe. Yet forcible as is the example I have mentioned, still it is after all weak and inadequate (ἀσθενὲς καὶ ἀνίσχυρον). For of God we speak not all we ought (for that is known to Him only), but so much as the capacity of human nature has received, and so much as our weakness can bear. For we explain not what God is but candidly confess that we have not exact knowledge concerning Him (ἀκριβὲς περὶ αὐτοῦ οὐκ οἴδαμεν). For in what concerns God to confess our ignorance is the best knowledge (μεγάλη γνῶσις, τὸ τὴν ἀγνωσίαν). Therefore magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His Name together[...]"[154]

In Cyril's sermon negative theology has an obviously rhetorical use and therefore also (it could be argued) a practical function. Negative theological statements are made in order to realize a certain liturgical function. We do not find the same technical language in this passage as in, e.g., Clement. But we do find the same reasoning as in Tertullian: Knowing that we do not know God is the highest knowledge of God. What is especially noteworthy in Cyril's sermon is his awareness of the inability of human language to express the divine, something which does not lead to quietism, but to an emphasis on liturgy.[155]

Seen in a broader context, Cyril's statements might very well have an ethical significance, or at least it has consequences for practice. This way of using

153 Mortley notes that for Origen "God is within the intellect and not outside it [...] [t]he mind is of the same nature as that which it contemplates[...]". Mortley 1986, pp. 77-78

154 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses ad Illuminandos* 6.2, p. 33

155 Thus the Judeo-Christian distinction becomes the background for divine disclosure in liturgy. See Sokolowski 1993

negative theological statements is, by the way, very much reminiscent of the first epistle of John: “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” (1 Jn 4:12) As such we again see that a negative epistemological position has its positive side in practice.

Gregory of Nazianzus

Through the Alexandrian school, with Origen and others (Thaumaturgos?), the Cappadocian Fathers largely inherited Clement's philosophical ideals and his use of negative theology. But they made new use of them. Gregory of Nazianzus writes,

> “That God, the creative and sustaining cause of all, exists, sight and instinctive law inform us (ὄψις διδάσκαλος, καὶ ὁ φυσικὸς νόμος) - sight, which lights upon things seen as nobly fixed in their course, borne along in, so to speak, motionless movement; instinctive law, which infers (συλλογιζόμενος) their author through the things seen in their orderliness. How could this universe have had a foundation or constitution, unless God gave all things being and sustains them?”[156]

The philosophical method used by Gregory in the above could be called an instance of natural theology or *theosemiosis*, but only with regards to God's existence, not his being or essence.

It is crucial that very often the knowledge of the existence of God is not in some way deducted from premises to a conclusion, but a more or less intuitive knowledge: “What can your conception of the divine be, if you rely on all the methods of deductive argument?”, Gregory of Nazianzus asks.[157] This is how far *theosemiosis* can take us. That God exists is derived from the properties of nature. But God as such we cannot know anything about, and so positive theosemiosis inevitably bounces up against a negative limit: “[...]whatever we imagined or figured to ourselves or reason delineated is not the reality of God (οὐδὲ τοῦτο εἶναι θεόν).”[158] In the same oration Gregory of Naziansus says that:

> “Every slightest objection (ἐνιστάμενον) bars, hinders, the course of the argument (τὸν τοῦ λόγου δρόμον), and checks its progress. It is like applying the reins suddenly to galloping horses, making them veer round with the surprise of the shock. So it was with Solomon, the superior of his predecessors and contemporaries in education, gifted by God with breadth of heart and an expanse of vision ampler than the sand. The more he entered into profundities (τοῖς βάθεσι), the more his mind reeled. He made

156Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Theologia 28* 6, pp. 40-41.
157Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Theologia 28* 6. Clement of Alexandria is similar in his view on this point. See below.
158Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Theologia 28* 6

it a goal of his wisdom to discover just how far off it was."[159]

What we find here is not the 'unbroken' semiotic continuity from created nature to Creator that we find in other natural theologies. Thinking, though it is guided by "instinctive law" (φυσικὸς νόμος), is continually confronted, not confirmed, by the realities of God. Mentally to grasp the divine is "utterly beyond real possibility". This applies to "every creature born".[160] Even if the good design of nature proves the existence of God, He is infinitely different from everything we know. Our thinking about God is thus broken and 'far off'. Again this shows that often negative theology is not so much about proving that God is 'above' comprehension (a quantitative claim) as it is about establishing the conviction that God contradicts every expectation.

Basil of Caesarea

We should also consider the following statement by Basil of Caesarea (c. 329-379):

> "The lightning flashes of the divine beauty are absolutely ineffable (Ἀῤῥητοι) and indescribeable (ἀνεκδιήγητοι); speech cannot convey them; the ear cannot receive them. The morning star's rays, and the moon's brightness, and the sun's light, all these are unworthy to be mentioned in comparison (εἰκασίαν) to that glory, and are found greatly wanting (ἄτιμα) as analogies (σύγκρισιν) to the true light. They are more distant from the divine beauty than the depth of night and moonless gloom are from the pure light of noonday. This beauty is not contemplated by fleshly eyes but is grasped by the soul alone and the mind. If at any time it shined upon the saints, it also left behind in them the unbearable pain of yearning.[…]"[161]

The beauty of creation is "greatly wanting as analogies". This might seem like a 'quantitative' claim. But the claim is radicalized when Basil opposes the "depth of the night" with the "light of noonday". It is not just that these have nothing in common, except that they fall under a common category, 'beauty'. Rather they are mutually exclusive. Basil's analogy reflects the radical distinction between Creator and creation in a way that makes it plausible that we are talking of a qualitative distinction (even if the same label, 'beauty', can be applied to the two). God is not just above comprehension, but radically different from what can be comprehended, if not opposite to this (the use of a common category makes such opposition ambivalent, of course).

159Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Theologia 28* 21
160Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Theologia 28* 4
161Basil of Caesarea, *Asceticon magnum sive Quastiones* 2.1, pp. 113-114

While all terms regarding this world can be defined negatively in their difference to others, God is “differently different” and He is what He is completely independently of the world. Basil's poetic claims about the beauty of the divine certainly fits into such a definition (as quoted above), and Gregory of Nyssa's claim that “[...]the characteristic of the divine nature is to transcend all characteristics”[162] seems to affirm the idea that in negative theology based on the Judeo-Christian distinction God is “differently different”. But Basil affirms the distinction between God's essence and his activities through which God can be known.[163]

Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa was the one among the Cappadocians who most thoroughly developed negative theology in technical terms. The Judeo-Christian distinction was fundamental, not least in the polemics against Eunomianism. God's essence can only be described in negative definitions. Gregory grounds this in an idea of divine infinity. God's activities can be spoken of in positive definitions, though Gregory at times calls God's power and similar things ineffable.[164] Gregory is also a good example that negative theology had a much more ’mystical’ and as such ascetic and ethical function in the Cappadocians.

The incomprehensibility of God was ascribed a positive value, e.g. when Gregory famously claimed in his writings *On the Life of Moses* that”[t]his truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied (κόρον) in the desire to see him.”[165] For Gregory the fact that God is unknowable had immense ethical consequences. The ‘hinge’ of negative theology in Gregory’s works is the notion of God’s infinity (God is ἄπειρον and ἀόριστος). This idea of infinity, conceived as the lack of limits, is reflected in Gregory’s ethics. Gregory notes that where the perfection of “[...]everything that can be measured by the senses[...]” is marked off by definite boundaries, the perfection of virtue *knows* no limit, since “[...]no good has a limit (ὅρον) in its own nature (φύσει)[...]”[166]. The good can only be limited by its opposite. Therefore, everything that is marked off by boundaries is not virtue. From this also follows that it is “[...]undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection (τοῦ τελείου)[...]”.[167] Gregory concludes by introducing the theme of *epektasis* (infinite or perpetual

162*DeVitMoys.* 2.234
163Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia in illud Attende tibi ipsi* 7. Basil makes an interesting analogy: As the human soul is only recognized from its activities, so God is.
164*Cant.* 1.33, p. 35
165*DeVitMoys.* 2.239, p. 116
166*DeVitMoys.* 1.5, p. 30
167*DeVitMoys.* 1.8, p. 31

progress in virtue): “For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness.”[168]

The ethical use of negative theology that we find here is reminiscent of the form that we know in the later, more well known forms of Pseudo-Dyonysius and the medieval tradition stemming from this. Also, the pragmatic (ethical) function is to some degree what determines the contents of the theology. Gregory's polemical engagements mean that we cannot simply identify his negative theology with the later Pseudo-Dyonysian *via negativa*, even if it looks similar to this.[169]

Negative theology in theory and practice

So far we have only drawn the contours of a broad concept of negative theology. Most examples might seem to be 'theoretical' statements about the character of God, God's activities, His ineffability and the like. This is only partly true however, since many examples above are taken from a context where the statement have a practical function, whether polemical, liturgical or ethical. We should be aware that just as different forms of negative theology could be used in homiletic and similarly rhetorical contexts, different forms of negative theology was also used in ethical contexts. We will discuss the most obvious ways in which negative theology must be assumed to shape ethics and moral epistemology in particular. But before doing so we will attempt to distinguish between different forms or functions of negative theology. The framework of these forms is most often (but not always) the 'Judeo-Christian distinction' between God's ineffable nature and his works or activities which are not ineffable. This framework can be filled out in different ways, as we will see.

The terminology of negative theology

In the negative theological tradition from Philo to the Church Fathers and Neo-Platonism a broad range of terms were applied technically, philosophically and rhetorically. Often the privative alpha is present in the terms used in negative theologies, and in a broad sense any theology that speaks of God using such terms could be called 'negative'. Also, in the tradition we find examples of linguistic reflections on how to apply negative theology by forming new names for God using the privative alpha (especially in Gregory of Nyssa). There are, however, terms which are more obviously examples of negative theology than others.

Not all negative statements about God are equally radical examples of negative

168*DeVitMoys.* 1.10, p. 31
169In the part on Gregory we will discuss these themes more systematically. See below.

theology. Hence that God is called, e.g., 'immortal'/'incorruptible' (ἀφθαρτος) does not necessarily mean that we have a full-blown negative theology. Depending on the context, terms like this might hold a certain negative theological meaning anyway. We should conceive of the field as a network of negatively defined names, a family relationship of concepts that does not necessarily, by themselves, imply negative theology, but can be said to do so to the degree that they revolve around central concepts such as the ineffability and incomprehensibility of God. Also, the most important contextual factor might prove to be the ontological framework established by the distinction between Creator and creation (as discussed above in relation to Philo). Compared to this distinction, whether God's incomprehensibility or ineffability or similar is derived from, e.g. his infinity or oneness might prove to be secondary items, i.e. postulates put forward to give a comprehensible theoretical background for one's negative theology.

Some terms are names applied to God (such as ineffable, unnameable, infinite etc.), and some refer to the methodology of the discipline (such as negation or abstraction). It is not possible to make a complete and adequate overview here. But as the above presentation was intended to at least give some important examples of negative theology in the early Church, it will also be used as the offset for the following. Hence many of the terms discussed below are extracted from passages quoted above. Most terms used tend to have a variety of meanings. Moreover, an author might present obvious examples of negative theological thinking without explicitly using the standard terms associated with this tradition. We are dealing with a genre that often generates a poetic and metaphorical language. Hence it can be hard to gain a general overview of the terminologies of the tradition. Nevertheless, having a tentative overview might at least give us some sense about what we are dealing with, what we are looking for, and what we need to be careful about when discussing negative theology. For this reason, the following will discuss some of the uses of terms and concept central for the tradition. Some of the most important terms in question (with all their derived and related meanings) are treated below. Also, a terminology will be useful when quoting translated passages. In the following, translations will be modified in order to fit with the proposed terminology.

Some of the terms belong to a linguistic or logical category, others to an epistemological or ontological class. It is not always clear, however, where to categorize a term – for example, is infinitude an inherent ontological quality of something, or does it mean that something can not be approached through

ordinary language, with its limits (an epistemological claim)? Is it a positive or a negative concept? For example we often see that 'simplicity', which is not explicitly a negative definition (it does not contain the privative alpha), is really conceived of as an inherent negative definition.[170] Because of problems as these, we will not attempt to schematize our terminology too rigidly, but simply mention a range of examples of how the different terms are used.[171]

We can distinguish between perhaps four classes. Firstly we have terms that have to do with speech and language. Secondly we have terms that have to do with epistemology. Thirdly we have terms that have to do with ontology. Fourthly we have methodological (meta-level) terms.

1) Language. As we have seen in Philo the ineffability of God is central. God is basically ἄρρητος (adjective, negation of ῥητός, 'spoken of', 'famous' or 'utterable')[172], a term that can also mean unspoken, but which is better translated as ineffable. A similar term often used by Gregory of Nyssa is ἀπόρρητος. Though this term can often mean 'forbidden' or 'not to be spoken of' it will also be translated as 'ineffable'. That God is essentially ineffable is, perhaps, Philo's primary negative theological claim. If we agree with Wolfson and others that Philo represents the first clearly philosophical example of negative theology, then it would be reasonable to see the tradition grounded in the idea of the ineffability of God. Hence we might talk of 'arretic' theology. The term 'ineffable' is closely related to the term ἄφατος (negation of φατός, 'famous', 'spoken', 'notable'), meaning 'not uttered', 'not named' which we will translate as 'unutterable'.[173] This might cause some confusion, since ἄρρητος is sometimes translated as 'unutterable'.[174] Often the term ἀνεκδιήγητος is also translated as 'unutterable' as well, but we will translate as 'indescribeable' (as in modern Greek where it also means 'untold'). Another term that has to do with language is ἀκατονομάστοις or more simply ἀνωνόμαστον, 'unnameable'. This and other terms that talk of the inability of putting a predicate or a name on God are important as they relate to issues of language and logic, e.g. in Clement of Alexandria where God's oneness and his being the first principle mean that he does not fall under any names. Though they refer to our inabilities, mostly such terms are used directly in reference to the nature of God, i.e. God Himself is ineffable. Moreover they are

170 This is arguably the case in Clement of Alexandria, as it is in Plotinus. Wolfson 1947
171 See appendix I for a comprehensive list.
172 LSJ, "ἄρρητος". PGL translates ἀρρήτως 'indescribably', 'inexplicably', 'ineffably', 'inexpressibly'. PGL, "ἀρρήτως", p. 230
173 LSJ "ἄφατος". PGL translates ἄφατος "in a way that cannot be described, abundantly". PGL "ἀφάτως", p. 274
174 For example Wolfson 1952

also used in reference to the properties, powers or activities of God.[175] Usually the terms are used adjectively, describing a quality, or a lack of a certain quality, in God. God is ineffable, God's origin is ineffable, etc. Often we see the term used independently of other negative definitions, and very often it is used in a rhetorical context.

2) Epistemology. If we move from linguistics (speech) to epistemology (thinking), we find a term like ἀκατάληπτος which means 'ungraspable' or 'incomprehensible' and will be translated as 'incomprehensible'. That something is ἀκατάληπτος basically means that it cannot be reached or touched.[176] In Skepticism this term means the inability to comprehend or attain conviction.[177] In Stoic epistemology κατάληψις means comprehension or grasping (as πρόληψις means preconception or anticipation) in the sense of direct apprehension.[178] Against Stoicism academic skepticism claimed that all perceptions were incapable of bearing any comprehensive relationship to their object.[179] The term ἀκατάληπτος is sometimes translated as "beyond apprehension" (e.g. Bradshaw's quote of Philo),[180] but this often implies too much: Not least does the 'beyond' seem to imply some quantitative measure, whether spatial or 'intellectual'. But often the point in using this term is that God is qualitatively different. A related term is ἀναφής, meaning 'impalpable'. Another related term is ἀπερινόητος, which basically means that something cannot be touched by the mind. We will translate it as 'incomprehensible' as well. Moreover, the invisibility of God is often an element in negative theologies. That God is ἀθέατος or ἀόρατος, 'unseen' or 'invisible', is often taken to have epistemological or moral consequences though the term is rarely understood to imply negative theology as such.[181] It is our claim that it often does so in a late antique Christian theological context (*The Epistle to Diognetus* being an example of this). We will translate both terms as 'invisible'.

3) Ontology. A commonly used adverb to express God's transcendence is the word ἐπέκεινα, 'beyond' or 'above'.[182] This can express an ontological relationship, as well as an epistemological one (e.g. if God is above speech). A central ontological term, especially in later negative theologies, is ἄπειρον (negation of

175See for example Gregory of Nyssa, *ConEunI.* 1.21
176See, e.g., Aristotle 921b23
177LSJ, " ἀκατάληπτος"
178Krauth & Calderwood 1878, p. 589
179http://www.oxfordreference.com, "Scepticism", 8-7-2013
180Bradshaw 2004, p. 63
181PGL, "ἀόρατος", p. 168
182In Plato the Good is said to be "beyond (ἐπέκεινα) being in seniority and power". Plato, *Politeia* 509

'limited'), 'infinite'.[183] A related, almost synonymous term is ἀόριστος which we will translate as 'unlimited', though the terms are often used interchangeably (as Gregory of Nyssa says: “the unlimited (ἀόριστος) is the same as the infinite (ἄπειρόν)”[184]). Another term is ἀδιεξίτητον, 'inexhaustable'. Though this term often denotes inexhaustability in the sense of quantitative infinitude, it is only to some degree an ontological term, since it can refer to the inability of the thinking subject to exhaust its object, due to the nature of either subject or object. Related to 'infinite' is ἀδιάστατον, meaning without dimensions, interval or gap, or 'continuous', 'undivided'.[185] It is especially central when God is distinguished from creation in time and space (that which is διαστατόν). Two related terms that are obviously ontological, but not clearly 'negative' in the radical sense is ἀνεπιδεής and ἀνενδεής. That something is ἀνενδεής means that it is in want of nothing or complete.[186] But we need a term with a negative prefix. We go for 'indeficient'. Related to this is ἄφθαρτος, which we translate as 'incorruptible'.[187] In a passage quoted above Justin Martyr notes that God has “ineffable (ἀρρήτου) glory and form”.[188] Hence Justin does not (in this passage) link ineffability with formlesness. But Justin links ineffability with another term that have an ontological significance, namely 'unbegotten'/'ungenerate', when he says that “we have the unbegotten (ἀγέννητον) and ineffable (ἀρρήτου) God as witness both of our thoughts and deeds”[189] and “we worship and love the Word who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God”.[190] That God is ἀγένητος or ἀγέννητος often has negative theological implications. We translate these terms as 'unoriginate(d)' and 'ungenerate(d)'.[191]

As noted, the distinction between God's essence and his activities are very important in many negative theologies. The terms used to refer to these two categories are not as such negative definitions, but they form a framework that is often crucial when applying negative definitions to the divine. God's ineffable being, nature or essence is often referred to with terms such as ὀυσία, φύσις or ὑπόστασις (in the pre-Nicene context where this sometimes refers to substance). What God does is often referred to using terms such as ἐνέργεια, δύναμίς, ἔργον or ποίημα, typically translated as activity, power, function/work and

183It is an ongoing discussion to what degree this term signifies a qualitative, essential infinitude in Patristic authors. See the part on Gregory of Nyssa below.
184*ConEunI.* 30.5
185PGL, “ἀδιάστατος”, p. 34
186PGL translates “in need of nothing”. PGL, “ἀνενδεής”, p. 133
187LSJ, “ἄφθαρτος”
188Justin Martyr, *Apologia Prima* 9
189Justin Martyr, *Apologia Secunda* 12
190Justin Martyr, *Apologia Secunda* 13
191PGL, “ἀγένητος”, “ἀγέννητος”, p. 15

work/doing/making, respectively.

Then there is στέρησις, 'privation'.[192] Privation is often the equivalent of negation (ἀπόφασις), though in the sphere of ontology rather than language and epistemology. This distinction is, however, not always clear (in Aristotle we have a realist logic which means that these levels cannot be distinguished clearly).[193] Though the opposition between good and evil, being and non-being is amongst the most radical in Patristic thought, a peculiarity presents itself, in that some of the *apophatic* strategies applied in speaking about the divine find their equivalents when speaking about its opposite. Evil defined as privation, the utter lack of good, is, of course, the most well-known example of this.

4) Methodology. We can also talk of methodological terms that describe the practice of negative theology. The term ἀπόφασις is typically translated as negation (from ἀπό+φᾶσις), literally meaning 'to turn away' or to 'finish off' an 'appearance' (φᾶσις), i.e. completing something in the sense of giving a full judgment. The LSJ defines the verb ἀποφαίνω as 'show forth, display' or 'make known, declare' and ἀπόφημι as to 'speak out, declare flatly or plainly' or as to 'say no'.[194] The noun ἀπόφασις means either 'denial, negation' (being “predication of one thing away from another, i.e. negation of it”) or “sentence, decision”. Hence the term ἀπόφασις has a double meaning of negation as well as decision or judgment. In Patristic Greek it can mean a decree or the judgment of God, as well as negation.[195] As a rhetorical figure ἀπόφασις refers to “the raising of an issue by claiming not to mention it”,[196] but as a technical philosophical term its meaning is more specific. In Aristotle’s logic the term ἀπόφασις is used technically, meaning logical negation in a proposition (in opposition to κατάφασις, affirmation).[197] Negation typically differs from privation (στέρησις) which means that something lacks a property that it could otherwise have had (e.g. blindness). Hence privation is mostly an ontological concept. Just as important as ἀπόφασις is ἀφαίρεσις, abstraction, literally the taking away of something, or removal (even of, e.g., sins, hence the term is not just a technical epistemological term).[198] The idea of abstraction or removal is derived from geometry where the abstract form of something can be derived at by removing it from its context. Hence though there is

192LSJ, “στέρησις”
193Hence Mortley, with reference to Whittaker, has argued against van Winden that 'στέρησις' for Aristotle was not only ontological. Whittaker 1969; Mortley 1986, p. 258. Mortley refers to Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 1011b, 1056a
194LSJ, ”ἀποφαίνω”
195PGL, “ἀπόφασις”
196E.g., “I will not mention that ...”. Merriam-Webster, “apophasis”.
197Aristotle 17a25, 1142a
198PGL, “ἀφαίρεσις”

a negative element in this method, it does not necessarily produce negative definitions. The terms ἀπόφασις and ἀφαίρεσις are often confused, however. Plotinus often used the term ἀφαίρεσις, abstraction or 'taking away', more or less synonymously to the technical sense of ἀπόφασις in Aristotle, denial or negation.[199] But even if the terms were used synonymously, they can be used typologically to distinguish between elements in negative theologies (we will develop this typology below).

Is there a difference between the *via remotionis* and the *via negationis*?

From medieval philosophy we know the terms *via remotionis* ("way of removal") and *via negationis* ("way of negation").[200] These two ideas can be traced to concepts in Aristotelian logic, negation (ἀπόφασις) and abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις). Drawing on Philo and the (Neo-)Platonists, the subsequent tradition of the Church Fathers often uses the terms ἀπόφασις and ἀφαίρεσις more or less interchangeably.[201] This does not mean that there is no difference between an *apophatic* and an *aphairetic* method, however. At least we can distinguish between two tendencies, one that affirms, e.g., the incomprehensibility of God by means of abstraction and one that does this by means of negation. The former will often stress the simplicity of God (as in Clement of Alexandria) since the method of abstraction is derived from a mathematical method, while the other will often stress the infinity or formlessness of God. Schematically speaking, then, to ἀφαίρεσις belongs an idea of abstracting from complexity (compositeness), tending to simplicity, and to ἀπόφασις an idea of negating finitude, tending towards infinity (formlessness). These things are not, however, necessarily incompatible or unrelated themes, but tendencies. Again, negative theology is a broad category under which can be distinguished between, amongst others, *apophatic* and *aphairetic* theology.

In Aristotle ἀφαίρεσις is distinguished technically from ἀπόφασις, being the method of denying a property in order that other properties may become more distinct. This is not least a method in mathematics.[202] In the tradition of negative theology, especially from the Middle-Platonists, the term becomes gradually synonymous with ἀπόφασις.[203] An example of negation (ἀπόφασις) is when

199Wolfson 1952, p. 121
200In Thomas, the *via remotionis* is a way of clearly distinguishing between Creator, as the first cause, and creature. *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.10-102
201Wolfson 1952, p. 129
202 Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1142a; *Metaphysica* 1061a29
203Wolfson 1957, p. 148

Aristotle argues that God and the brutes have that in common that they are not virtuous.[204] Neither belongs to the class of things that can be virtuous or non-virtuous. This is not a common privative property. It does not mean that they could have been virtuous but are not,[205] and so they are not viceful either. The lack of virtue in this case only means that God and the brutes are common in not being describable in terms of virtue or vice. In their actual properties, whether positive or negative, they can still be completely incomparable. In the same way 'not-man' is identified as an indefinite noun.[206] Gregory of Nazianzus notes that defining God solely through negations is like saying what two times five is by counting all the numbers besides ten.[207] Mortley suggests that it was such indefiniteness that made the *apophatic* method unattractive to Aristotle.[208] Negation in this sense is arguably what is going on when, e.g., Eriugena claims that God does not have 'being'. It does not, of course, mean that God does not exist in the same way that unicorns do not exist.

When Gregory talks about stillness as being "free from the mire and noise without, and our commanding faculty is not confused by illusory, wandering images, leading us, as it were, to mix fine script with ugly scrawling, or sweet-smelling scent with slime"[209], he also seems to talk about abstraction.

Negation is not the same as opposition, though these are often confused. As Mortley notes "common-sense often extends negation into opposition, though a coherent logical account would scarcely do".[210] That God is not material, i.e., immaterial, does not make him belong to a class that is 'opposite' to the material. The Basil quote above balances on the line between these two: God is as far from material beauty as the dark night is from the light of noonday (opposite?), but He still belongs to the class 'beautiful', i.e., He is not defined simply as that which is opposite of what we know.[211]

Since the term 'apopathic theology' is often used synonymously for negative theology, this suggests that the term ἀπόφασις and its derived and related equivalents would be the primary term in negative theology. The term is rarely a part of a technical vocabulary in Patristic literature, however. Hence in Gregory of

204Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1145a
205This would rather be an instance of privation, though it is only in Thomas' definition that privation exclusively describes the failure of something to be what it should be. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* 1a, 66, 2. See also Mortley 1986, p. 261
206Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* 16a31-17a25
207Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Theologia 28* 9
208Mortley 1981, p. 10
209Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Theologia* 27 3
210Mortley 1981, p. 9
211Basil of Caesarea 2005, pp. 113-114

Nyssa who used negative theology extensively the term in its different forms has only 35 instances.[212]

As noted, very often terms used in negative theology has a 'privative' alpha as prefix (ἀ-). Though this alpha is often referred to as 'privative', it very rarely denotes 'privation' (στέρησις). That God is ineffable does not mean that he 'lacks' effability, but only that he does either not participate in such a class of things or is directly opposite to such things. Moreover, the alpha can also be used to give extra force to the meaning of a word.

Justin denied that the words we use for referring to God are really 'names' (ὄνομα). They are rather appellations or opinions.[213] This seems a natural conclusion if God is believed to be essentially unknowable. But with Gregory of Nyssa we see how a theory of names can be worked out so we can apply names to God even if He is essentially ineffable. Names are formed (produced by conception, ἐπίνοια), Gregory says, from negative descriptions of a thing with the privative alpha. Hence Gregory develops a linguistic method that is *apophatic*, but is it also *aphairetic*? In Gregory there seems to be a tension between these two. At times he defines God relatively to creation, at other times he says that since God does not depend on anything else he should not be defined relatively to creation.[214]

Given our characterization of the Judeo-Christian distinction above, it would seem that theology based on this is *apophatic* rather than *aphairetic*: The *apophatic* method deals in denying that an object belongs to certain classses, while the *aphairetic* method deals in distinguishing the object from these classes. The former consists, it would seem, in a claim that the object does not belong to this or that class, while the latter defines the object negatively in relation to the class. A likely conclusion would be that only the *apophatic* method adequately reflects the fact that God is 'differently different'. Things are not that simple however. Clement of Alexandria, for example, inspired by the Middle-Platonists, often unfolds his negative theology in terms of abstraction.[215] It is equally clear, however, that Clement does this on the background of the 'Judeo-Christian distinction'. Clement repeatedly notes that God can only be known in so far as he reveals himself.[216] Also, in the case of Gregory of Nyssa we see that he uses the *apophatic* method of a way to establish the experience that God is completely ineffable, i.e., it is not

212When searching the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae for ἀπόφασις, ἀποφάσεως, ἀποφάσει, ἀπόφασιν, ἀποφάσεις, ἀποφάσεων.
213Justin, *Apologia Secunda* 6, p. 190
214*ConEunII*. 535, pp. 303-304
215Mortley 1986, p. 44
216, e.g., *Str.* 5.11

grounded in but leads to this notion (e.g., in *On the Life of Moses*, where Moses negates his opinions about God and in 'the dark cloud' realizes that God is essentially incomprehensible).

Our claim is that what matters is not so much the technical details of a negative theology, i.e., whether it is *aphairetic* or *apophatic,* but what is given logical and epistemological priority, and what ontological framework one's method is based upon. The main question is whether or not a negative theology presupposes the Judeo-Christian distinction. That it, despite of this, is not irrelevant to distinguish between these types becomes clear in moral philosophical contexts where it can be shown that different ethical theories follow from different types of negative theology.

Polemical uses

In polemical contexts, negations are applied to criticize what is perceived to be wrong perceptions of God. By arguing that God is ineffable in this or that aspect, the polemicist furthers the claim that a given theory of God in this aspect must be wrong. As such Paul's attacks on "the wisdom of this world" in 1 Cor 1:20-21 can be considered as implying a negative theology, in so far as Paul is saying that none of the wisdom of this world is adequate for knowing God.[217]

When applying negative theology for pragmatic purposes, as used polemically or rhetorically, we see that negative theological discourses tend to incorporate different kinds of negative theology. If the purpose of negative theological speech is to discard some positive notion of God's essence, it matters less if the available argument presupposes that God is unknowable because he is, e.g, 'more' or 'opposite to' nature or whatever. Hence the two first types, though they might seem incompatible, becomes compatible as they meet in polemical practice. In the apologetic literature negative theology is often applied as a weapon against 'philosophy' and Pagan religion. An example that will be discussed in length can be found in the eight chapter of *The Epistle to Diognetus* where the philosophers are attacked. No one has seen God or made Him known, but He has manifested himself through faith alone.[218] The epistle also contains attacks on Pagan 'idolatry' and the Jewish sacrificial cult, driven by a similar insistence on God's invisibility and his lack of need.[219] Similar examples can be found in multitudes of apologetic texts, attacking Pagan religion and philosophy. The example from *The Epistle to*

2171 Cor 1:20-21
218*AdDiog.* 8
219*AdDiog.* 3.5, in particular.

Diognetus shows how a negative theology based on the Judeo-Christian distinction is embedded in a polemicism against Hellenic philosophy. God's self-revealing character is used as an argument against the belief that philosophy can give insights into the character of God. This polemical function exemplifies in itself a pragmatic use of negative theology. Such polemicism easily has ethical consequences, since the refutation of the epistemological and philosophical soundness of a practice will usually imply that a negative normative value is ascribed to the practice.

Hence when the author of *The Epistle to Diognetus* argues against Paganism and Judaism, he puts the Christian lifestyle as an alternative though this is done in mostly negative terms, i.e., Christians do not follow these rituals, but they live like 'normal' people (hence the polemical use of negative theology can seem to imply a certain 'ethics of invisibility' which we will discuss below). A similar account where the Christian lifestyle is defined in more positive terms are made by Clement in Alexandria in the context of ethical and ascetic exhortation and theorizing. Clement argues that:

> "[…]the most of men, clothed with what is perishable, like cockles, and rolled all round in a ball in their excesses, like hedgehogs, entertain the same ideas of the blessed and incorruptible God as of themselves. But it has escaped their notice, though they be near us, that God has bestowed on us ten thousand things in which He does not share[…]"[220]

Just prior to this Clement argues that abstraction is necessary to attain the correct comprehension of God. But in his critical statements about "the most of men" we see that it is God himself who has "bestowed on us ten thousand things in which He does not share". God has himself revealed his difference from Creation. This does not negate the fact that "abstraction from the body and its passions" is an ethical imperative and necessary to the perfection of what he calls the 'true gnostic'. This idea is often bound with a particular anthropology or view of the human soul (see below).

Though no obviously moral philosophical consequences is drawn from negative theology, by itself the polemical use of negative theology does have consequences for religious practices, ritual, liturgy and worship. As such it is often a matter of establishing and affirming the Judeo-Christian distinction in a critique of religious forms that does not seem to acknowledge the radical qualitative difference between Creator and creation.

220*Str.* 5.6

Negative theology and deification

Negative theology as discussed so far does not seem to leave much room for the well-known idea that the soul can 'ascend' to God, that human beings can be assimilated to the divine or become 'like' to God, perhaps even in a process of deification (θέωσις). This idea can be found in a range of Platonic sources,[221] and similar ideas are richly present in Patristic literature from the second century and on, especially in those thinkers who are also the most developed and explicit proponents of negative theology. This might seem strange if negative theology is really about upholding a qualitative distinction between God and human beings. At some point, however, negative theology becomes not only a way of upholding this distinction, but simultaneously a way of overcoming it. Plotinus is a good example of this when he says that:[222]

> "Our thought cannot grasp the One as long as any other image remains active in the soul [...] To this end, you must set free your soul from all outward things and turn wholly within yourself, with no more leaning to what lies outside, and lay your mind bare of ideal forms, as before of the objects of sense, and forget even yourself, and so come within sight of that One."[223]

This development especially takes form with the Platonically influenced thinking of Clement of Alexandria and reaches its heights in the ascetic and ethical works of Gregory of Nyssa. A similar development takes place in Middle- and Neo-Platonism. H.A. Wolfson argued that negative theology (*apophatic* theology in Wolfson's terminology) in Middle- and Neo-Platonic authors such as Albinus and Plotinus can to some degree be traced back to Philo who was the first to talk of God as completely unknowable, unnameable and ineffable.[224] But where Philo had used negative attributes about God as a means of expressing the "unlikeness between God and all other beings", this is not the case in Albinus and Plotinus for whom there is no radical ontological distinction that needs to be bridged from 'above' before the soul can 'ascend' to God (there is a quite radical distinction, yes, but this distinction can be bridged by human beings through negative theology and

221 E.g., Plato, *Theaetetus* 176a-b; Albinus, *Didaskalikos* 28; Plotinus, *Ennead* I.2.1

222 Plotinus' philosophy is often treated as an ontology with ethical consequences, but it seems more reasonable to see the ethical endeavour as the cornerstone which must be developed by reflections on ontology and logic. The Ennead discussing ethics comes first.

223 Plotinus, *Ennead* 6.9.7. Notice that Plotinus apparently combines an *aphairetic* approach where the soul is first abstracted from its surroundings with an *apophatic* approach where the soul finally negates itself.

224 Wolfson 1952, p. 115

asceticism).[225] Where the aim in traditional Platonism was usually the more modest one of becoming 'like to God as far as possible'[226] the aim is now to become completely assimilated to the divine, not merely to be sinless, but to be God (θέον εἶναι).[227] The method for doing this seems somewhat reminiscent of a kind of negative theology (both *apophatic* and *aphairetic*). Abstraction and negation serves as methods or procedures for helping the soul rid itself of cruel notions of itself and the divine, whereby it rises above matter and material being.[228] Plotinus' method is best identified as *aphairetic*. This method is not so much applied in order to affirm the difference between God and Man, but just as much to overcome this difference.

In the Christian context, the combination of negative theology as the affirmation of the difference between God and human beings, with negative theology as a method for overcoming this difference, becomes possible through the Irenaean dictum that is probably most famous in the words of Athanasius: “[Christ] was made man that we might be made God.”[229] In Clement of Alexandria this idea is developed in moral terms so that “[T]he Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God.”[230] Hence we see that through the incarnation the gap between Creator and creation is bridged so that the Judeo-Christian distinction is no longer keeping Man from approaching or even becoming divine.

In so far as negative theology is used in such a process of deification, it differs from the type described where its function is to uphold a radical distinction between Creator and creation. This is the case even if its peculiar statements about God's nature and activities are the same at face value. Knowing the context is crucial.[231] In other words, there are, in Patristic thought, often two functions of negative theology present that each belongs, so to speak, on each side of the incarnation (the one applied to uphold the radical distinction between Creator and creation, the other one applied to bridge this gap, made possible through the atonement). In a sense this runs parallel to the distinction between Law and Gospel in many interpretations, e.g., in Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on the

225Mortley 1984, p. 53
226Plato, *Theaetetus* 176a-b
227Plotinus, *Ennead* 1.2.6
228Plotinus, *Ennead* 6.9.7, tr. Armstrong
229Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 54. Irenaeus writes: “[T]he Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.” Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5
230*Protr.*
231E.g., when Gregory of Nyssa calls God invisible this might have a very different function from when God is called invisible in *The Epistle to Diognetus*.

Song of Songs: The Law is as something exterior the separation wall that keeps human beings from God, but it is simultaneously the medium through which God reveals himself, and so in an interior, spiritual sense, when God himself has reached through the window in the wall, a union becomes possible.[232] This union however does not lead to a positive theology, but a new negative theology, sometimes similar at face value, but with a different function. As types the two functions of negative theology can be abstracted so that we at least in principle can talk of the one form without the other. The case of much Pagan Neo-Platonism[233] also shows that the second kind can work without the first.

With Wissink we can typologically distinguish between two types of negative theology: While the first form (or function) of negative theology is motivated by a belief in a self-revealing creator that is qualitatively different from the creation, and thus ineffable, the second form is often centered around a sort of natural theology.[234] But even if there exists two kinds of negative theology, Wissink argues, the two in practice often take the form of the other: “Philo […], Basilius […], and Pseudo-Dionysius […] were probably motivated by the Jewish or the Christian faith to adopt a predominantly negative way of speaking about God, but in doing so used Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic thinking.” It seems to belong to the indirect character of negative theology as such that the meaning of negative theological utterances must be sought on a plane below the immediate linguistic one. In doing so we must take into account the context and function of negative theology. What this means for our approach to negative theologies in general will be discussed in our concluding part.

Imitation of God and (in)visibility in ethics

With negative theology, imitation of God or deification will often consist in imitation of God's ineffability and incomprehensibility etc. Hence imitation of God

232*Cant.* 162, p. 173

233We can distinguish between Christian and non-Christian Neo-Platonism. That a Christian author uses elements from, e.g., the Platonic tradition, does not, however, make him a ‘Platonist’. The relationship between the Platonic tradition and Christian thought is more complex: It was not simply a matter of ‘taking over’ Neo-Platonism or construing Christian theology in the terms of a certain philosophical system. Neo-Platonism was not an all-or-nothing-system, but a batch of ideas, approaches and temperaments that could be applied differently depending on contents. Hence some elements of Neo-Platonic thought might have fitted well with ‘orthodox’ Christian theology while others required and led to a transformation of the Church's teachings. It should also be noted that since a strict distinction between Platonism, Middle-Platonism and Neo-Platonism is often anachronistic, by 'Neo-Platonism' will be meant that broad range of thought developed in the Platonic tradition from the 2nd century and on. See Catana 2013

234See Wissink 2000

leads to what we will call an 'ethics of invisibility'. If God is invisible, so must Christians be. It is, of course, not obvious that the claim that God is 'invisible' belongs to a negative theology in the radical sense. But in so far as this claim is derived from or based on the Judeo-Christian distinction, this is arguably the case: In *The Epistle to Diognetus,* the Christians are said to be “distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe”, and they do not “lead a life which is marked out by any singularity.”[235] These claims seem to follow from a previous claim that God is invisible (ἀόρατος) and a following claim that Christians imitate God. In the third similitude from *The Pastor of Hermas*, Christians and sinners are compared to trees in the winter:

> “[N]either are the righteous manifest (φαίνονται) in this life (ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ), nor sinners, but they are alike (ὁμοιοί); for this life is a winter to the righteous, and they do not manifest themselves, because they dwell with sinners: for as in winter trees that have cast their leaves are alike, and it is not seen which are dead and which are living, so in this world neither do the righteous show themselves, nor sinners, but all are alike one to another.”[236]

Christians are not manifest (φαίνονται), Hermas says. Thus we could also talk of an ethics of non-manifestation. Hermas does not explicitly say that this is the product of the fact that God is invisible or similar. This is almost explicitly the case in *The Epistle to Diognetus,* however. What we find in this text could be called an 'ethics of invisibility'. The 'invisibility' of this ethics is not absolute, since Christians exactly because of the invisibility and immateriality of God does not participate in Pagan worship. As such Christians are not distinguished by what norms they follow, but by what norms they do not follow. This does not mean that there is no such thing as a Christian ‘ethics’, besides holding that Christians are or should not look and behave differently. Both epistles affirm that Christians live as strangers in this world, by the law of a different city (heaven or the kingdom of God), which means that they do not pursue power, wealth and so on.[237] But it seems that this foreign citizenship is exactly also what makes the Christian invisible. In Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa we see these themes developed in more philosophical forms. In Clement the perfect Christian “lives in the city as in a desert”.[238] Such a person lives a life of modesty and asceticism, but the person cannot be easily distinguished from others. Likeness to God is in important aspects something hidden. This idea is also developed in Gregory of Nyssa who describes

235*AdDiog.* 5.2, tr. Lightfoot
236Pastor of Hermas, *Pastor* 52.2-3, p. 33
237Pastor of Hermas, *Pastor* 50.1-11; *AdDiog.* 5.5
238*Str.* 7.12, p. 545

the priesthood as a life self-controlled, tough in appearance, but containing on the inside what is “hidden and invisible”.[239]

On the other hand, in concrete practice, when Christians imitate God they can be discerned as they help the poor, etc. Hence they become visible after all. This seeming paradox arguably reflects the distinction between οὐσία and ἐνέργεια, essence and activities, etc., as implied by typical formulations of the Judeo-Christian distinction. God is essentially invisible, but can be seen through his works. The same thing with Christians. The author of *The Epistle to Diognetus* and Hermas' Pastor do not say this explicitly, but there are reasons for seeing this as a proper explanation. The distinction is more obvious in Gregory of Nyssa:

> “If we who are united to Him by faith in Him, are synonymous with Him whose incorruptible nature is beyond verbal interpretation, it is entirely necessary for us to become what is contemplated in connection with the incorruptible nature and to achieve an identity with the secondary elements [virtues] which follow along with it.”[240]

Again, though it is not said explicitly, this seems to reflect the Judeo-Christian distinction. Gregory (as Philo) believed the human soul to be ineffable, but also that imitation of God must have visible consequences.[241]

Freedom and purification

The author of *The Epistle to Diognetus* came close to explicitly claiming that Christians are not ascetic. They do not “practice an extraordinary life (οὔτε βίον παράσημον ἀσκοῦσιν”.[242] The ethics of invisibility could by itself be understood in terms of freedom since it implies that there is no particular outward law limiting the believer (as in some of the Pauline epistles), but that exactly because of this the believer would simply follow the norms present in one's given context. The result of this is, taken by itself, not so much an ethics as an anti-ethics. Holding that God is completely different from anything created and does not need anything means that one cannot have, and does not need to have, a too high view on created things. Hence the critique of Pagan and Jewish religion which is often implied by negative theologies sets the Christian free in relation to worldly dependencies and religious duties.[243]

Ideas of freedom are often linked with some sort of asceticism, however. This is

239*DeVitMoys.* 2.285, p. 127
240*DeProf.*
241*InDiem.* 237-239, pp. 523-524
242*AdDiog.* 5.2. Literally ‘a particularly visible life’.
243Hence the idea of Christianity's desacralizing and secularizing effects.

not least the case in Gregory of Nyssa who combines an ethics of invisibility with ideas of asceticism on the one hand, and different ideas of spiritual freedom on the other.[244] In an important passage he writes that:

> ”[…]liberty (ἐλευθερία) is the coming up to a state which owns no master (ἀδέσποτόν) and is self-regulating (αὐτοκρατὲς); it is that with which we were gifted by God at the beginning, but which has been obscured by the feeling of shame arising from indebtedness. Liberty too is in all cases one and the same essentially; it has a natural attraction to itself. It follows, then, that as everything that is free will be united with its like, and as virtue is a thing that has no master, that is, is free, everything that is free will be united with virtue.”[245]

It is our claim that when such ideas of freedom is linked to negative theology it will often happen through an idea of abstraction rather than one of negation, i.e., freedom is considered as consisting in having a certain degree of distance to one's surroundings.[246] Hence if a negative theology emphasizes abstraction rather than negation, there is a chance that this will lead to what we could call an *aphairetic* ethics, an ethics of abstraction: If God is “unmingled”, so also must the soul be. This seems to be what is going on when, e.g., Gregory of Nazianzus wrote about his spiritual experiences that, “I penetrated the cloud, became enclosed in it, detached from matter and material things and concentrated, so far as might be, in myself.”[247] Also, Clement of Alexandria is a particularly good example of this. Virtue and piety, Clement says, is “unswerving abstraction (ἀμετανόητος χωρισμός) from the body and its passions.”[248] This has very concrete consequences. For example, Clement criticizes the use of makeup which he sees as dishonoring the “archetype by assuming foreign ornament”.[249] The body should, so to speak, be abstracted from foreign elements. While this could be called an *aphairetic* ethics, at the same time, Clement notes, nothing created can have (essential) similarity with God.[250] Hence in this context, at least, oneness should in the end be defined *apophatically* (rather than *aphairetically*), as the negation of compositeness, so that the good soul and God have that in common of not being composite, and thus 'one', though this does not make the good soul belong to the same class as God, in any positive sense.

244 Gregory even links these themes with ideas on social-ethical liberty, e.g., in his criticism of slavery. See, e.g., *Eccl.* 335-337 which is also discussed below.
245 *DeAnRes.* 101-105, p. 452
246 See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *Cant.* 64, p. 71, also discussed below
247 Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Theologia 28* 3
248 *Str.* 5.11, p. 460, modified. See the part on Clement.
249 *Paed.* 3.11, p. 287
250 *Str.* 6.18, p. 519

The relation between negative theology and ethics is especially obvious when conducted in relation to asceticism. Hence it is the task of the ascetic to attain independency and self-control. Negative theology and asceticism have a certain sense of ‘other-worldliness’ in common. If, for example, negative theology is a method for 'spiritual ascension' which helps the soul to clean itself of all material conceptions of the good, the link with some sort of asceticism is obvious. Of course the form taken by this asceticism depends on what, e.g., psychological and anthroplogical views one might further hold.

Consequences for moral epistemology

It is not unusual that negative terms applied to God as an instrument of critique against different forms of idolatry has anti-intellectualistic consequences for moral views. It is not that we see the fathers argue in favor of ethical particularism or against 'absolutism' (a rather modern distinction). But we do see a prevalent skepticism against a (merely) theoretical morality, as when the writer of *The Epistle to Diognetus* notes that Christians do not “possess any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men” and that they are not “masters of any human dogma as some are.”[251] The point seems to be that the negation of Pagan religious practices leads to some degree of indirect affirmation of whatever norms are present. This is of course different from a direct, positive affirmation of these norms. What we are dealing with is a kind of double negation that cannot be translated into a simple affirmation. But behind the claims in such texts as *The Epistle to Diognetus*, that Christians do not follow any particular customs, is arguably reflected a somewhat negative theology that renders abstract (general, non-contextual) positive statements about the nature of the good dubious. It seems that there is, sometimes, a connection between the idea of the simultaneously invisible and self-revealing character of God, and the conception of the Christian life, in these texts. If the invisible God reveals himself, but in his revelation goes ‘under cover’ in the flesh of a servant, then some sort of negative, indirect definitions seems to be needed in order to talk about the good. And if the life of the Christian is to reflect this, then we also to some degree need a sort of negative meta-ethics to be able to grasp this.

Maybe it could be argued that the apparent 'invisibility' of the Christian life has to do with the fact that Christian ethics are really a form of virtue ethics rather than a strictly principled ethics (wherefore it does not interfere with 'customs' or rules of behavior, at least not directly)? As such Christian ethics focus on the

251*AdDiog.* 5.3, tr. Lightfoot

personal (understood to some degree as the private) characteristics of the believer, rather than posing ethical and political principles.[252] The problem with this explanation is that authors such as those mentioned above never claim that the Christian lifestyle is only about ‘private’ virtues and not about social ethics – the contrary is rather the case, since imitating Christ by, e.g., helping the needy, is valued highly. Rather we need to hold on to the apparent paradoxality of Christian ‘ethics’. Claims about the invisibility of the Christians, such as those quoted, do of course not by themselves prove that an author had any sense of thought forms akin to negative theology, or that such theology had any special moral-epistemological consequences.

If we instead strengthen the above claims that Christian ethics is an 'ethics of invisibility', there is a chance that we could arrive at some sort of epistemological moral skepticism. Not a skepticism with regard to the existence of 'the good' or our ability to do 'the right', but with regard to our ability to have (reflective) knowledge about these things, at all. There is a range of good examples in the history of theological ethics, that the good Christian should not reflect, and indeed cannot reflect, upon his/her conduct.[253]

As a matter of linguistics, the question is how we define terms such as 'good', 'virtue' and 'perfection'. A simple instance of what could be called a negative moral linguistics in the *New Testament* is Paul's statements about love (at least some of them). Love (ἀγάπη), Paul says, “does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil […] Love never fails.”[254] Of course there are also some positive definitions of love in between these statements, “Love is patient, love is kind”, so Paul's exposition is not wholly negatively defined, unless, of course, it could be argued that 'patience' or 'kindness' are implicitly negative definitions (hardly the case, though). Especially Gregory of Nyssa develops such themes. Gregory's philosophy of language reminds us that any positive description of virtue must implicitly be a negation of non-virtue (liberation, overcoming of sin), but also that non-virtue must be defined as the negation of virtue. We convey “[…]the idea of goodness by the negation of badness, or *vice versa*[…]”, Macrina noted according to Gregory in the dialogue *On the Soul and*

252Others have seen, e.g., the beatitudes, to be evangelical counsels (the standard Roman Catholic view that the beatitudes are acts of supererogation for those who desire perfection), moral ideals, or rules pertaining to a different age (dispensationalism), rather than signs of a peculiar Christian ‘lifestyle’.

253E.g., Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling (Frygt og Bæven).*

2541 Cor 13, NIV

Resurrection.[255] This of course implies that 'evil' should be defined negatively, as the lack of good (privation, στέρησις). But it also implies that 'good' is synonymous to 'not-evil' (not the privation of evil, but the negation, ἀπόφασις).

The 'ethics of invisibility' in *The Epistle to Diognetus* and the case of Gregory suggests that when it comes to such things as theological statements and statements about the good, right, virtue, value and so on, a double negation cannot simply be translated into an affirmation. Praising some virtue is often equal to saying that it reflects God's being, but God's being can only be comprehended as the negation of evil. 'Virtue' is really 'not-not-virtue'. But the two are not simply logically equivalent. That this does not necessarily have any practical consequences should be obvious. But that there must be epistemological consequences is equally obvious. What we are dealing with is arguably a kind of holism where the meaning of concepts are defined in relation to what is not their extension. Such things as virtue cannot be defined in the abstract, but only in relation to a context, though negatively. This makes it hard to conceive of how ethical principles can look like. By ethical principles we should understand generally true propositions that designate moral value to certain objects, e.g., of the form 'if x is of the class F, then x is good'. But if moral value is defined negatively, e.g., by the class F being defined by its negative relation to the whole, then things are much more complicated. With such a negative, indirect definition of value ethical principles can hardly be adequate descriptions of, e.g., goodness, but must be understood as signs that point to the good, without describing it adequately. According to our definition of 'adequacy' and 'truth',[256] ethical principles of this kind can be true, though they are inadequate, since they lead to or point at value without capturing it propositionally.

Conclusion

We are now ready to go into depths with our three case studies. The primary hypothesis of the above is that much late antique Christian negative theology is developed inside a framework based on the Judeo-Christian distinction. The consequences for theological reflection are such that this will take the form of a *theologia viatorum* which cannot be adequate but only true (this is discernible, not least, in the idea of *epektasis*). This is also true for moral epistemology, and thus for theological ethics.

Our methodology must take this into account, in such a way that even if we

255*DeAnRes.*, p. 436
256In our definition of '*theologia viatorum*' above.

attempt to systematically point out the relationship between the Judeo-Christian distinction as an idea with certain developments in moral epistemology, this relationship cannot be conceived too narrowly. We must be aware of the theological and ethical contexts in which negative theologies are developed.

It is nevertheless probable that there are fundamental relationships between negative theology based on the Judeo-Christian distinction and certain moral philosophical ideas, in such a way that these can be identified through particular case studies that, despite contextual differences, are not completely incommensurable and can thus be compared. This can happen through different functions or forms of negative theology, for example polemical, *apophatic* or *aphairetic*.

But even if there might be technical differences between different uses of negative theology, what is crucial is not so much the particular form it takes, but its broader context. In other words, what matters is whether or not a negative theology and the ethics it produces has the Judeo-Christian distinction as its framework or not. The following intends to verify this hypothesis.

Part II. The ethics of invisibility in The Epistle to Diognetus

> *"Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practise an extraordinary kind of life. Nor again do they possess any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men, nor are they masters of any human dogma as some are. But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation."* (The Epistle to Diognetus, §5.1-4)

Introduction

The Epistle to Diognetus[257] is at once straightforward and enigmatic, both clear and obscure. Written by an unknown author to an almost equally unknown (though named) recipient, the epistle does not reveal much about the concrete historical circumstances of its production. We do know, however, that the epistle was probably written in the 2nd century (dating and historical context will be discussed below). In the prooemium the author presents the text as a respond to a Pagan of excellence who has inquired about the differences between Christian, Pagan and Jewish modes of worship. As the reply to this inquiry unfolds, we get the impression that in the time of writing, the Christians are still a minority group, whose doctrines are unknown to many, while at the same time being subject to persecution.

It is especially the author's exposition of the relation of the Christians to the world that has fascinated – and continue to fascinate – modern readers. Much rather the epistle has a 'political' form and character: Christians are repeatedly described as belonging to their own peculiar constitution, city or fatherland, while living in the cities and countries of the world as sojourners.[258] The epistle is not political in the sense of holding certain 'ideals' for social ethics, law or constitution in 'this world' (rather the opposite is the case). But it is undoubtedly political in its use of analogies and imagery, as well as its ascription to Christians of allegiance to a different "constitution (κατάστασιν)"[259].

257We use Marrou's edition with emendations. Marrou 1965. For quotations in English will be used Lightfoot, Roberts-Donaldson and Kirsopp-Lake interchangeably, though with discussions of the possible interpretations as needed.
258*AdDiog.* 5.5
259*AdDiog.* 5.4

These things can, however, easily overshadow the metaphysical and otherwise more fundamental philosophical (ontological, theological) elements that are implicitly and explicitly present in the epistle. In the second part of the epistle's polemical chapters, we see the application of a somewhat negative theology. Here God's 'negative' attributes (e.g. the fact the he does not need offerings) become a reason for discarding Jewish practices. These themes are further developed in the critique of 'the philosophers', which again works as a negative premise for a positive claim about God's work in the world. It would be too hasty to regard such claims as purely polemical.

The claims about God's invisibility plays a key role in the epistle's theology as well as its ethics. In the broad sense, and in a sense that is relevant for the present study, such claims can be described as negative theology. This has consequences for ethics as the author introduces a theme of imitation of God.[260] This creates a relationship of theology to anthropology and ethics, and the presence of an implicit negative theology through this link explains the 'invisibility' of the Christians in the world. Such talk of imitation is reminiscent of a philosophical vocabulary and thematic.[261] To what degree the introduction of such themes merely happens *ad hoc* or otherwise, will be discussed to the degree that it is relevant for understanding the philosophical background for the ethics of the epistle.

As such one of the aims of the following is to discern how rhetorical and polemical figures in the epistle might also have had philosophical content and implications for the author, and to which degree this have affected the relationship of negative theology and ethics (or the 'politics' of the relationship between the Christians and the world).

A central claim in the following is that the theology applied by the author is negative, though of a 'dialectical' kind (rather than a methodological *via negativa*), as it upholds a tension between the 'hiddenness' of God and His revelation in the world. This tension defines the relation of Christians to God and the world. So what characterizes (or should characterize) the Christians in the world? What are, e.g., the 'virtues' of the Christians? And how are they 'invisible' when they imitate God's work of salvation? Finally it will be asked how ethical principles of any kind are possible with this ethics. As a perspective on this we discuss the epistle's metaphor of 'the city' as a way of conceptualizing the Christians' relationship to the world.

260*AdDiog.* 10.4
261E.g. Neo-Pythagorean or Platonic. See below.

The Epistle to Diognetus

In the following will be discussed first the contextual historical details of the available manuscript, its possible author(s) and historical context. Secondly we will discuss the basic points of the epistle in the order they are presented.

The MS(S), dating, author and recipient

The Epistle to Diognetus is by many scholars regarded as one of the first examples of Christian apologetics. It can hardly be disputed that the epistle at face value gives the impression of having been written in the first centuries. The apparent need to explain a Pagan about the peculiarity of the Christian faith (τὴν θεοσέβειαν τῶν Χριστιανῶν),[262] and the many references to what seems to be contemporary persecutions of Christians are examples suggesting that the epistle was at least written well before the 4th century.

Because of the early dating the epistle has often been counted among the works of the apostolic fathers, e.g. by Roberts-Donaldson, based on dating as well as the epistle's "Pauline spirit" and similarities to the Clementine epistles.[263] The writer's claim to be a "disciple of apostles" also suggests such classification, though this claim appears in chapters that did probably not belong to the original epistle. This, and the apologetic character of the epistle, arguably makes it more reasonable to group it amongst the apologetic fathers.[264]

The epistle is never mentioned in other Patristic literature. The oldest known MS of the epistle was found in the 13th century, in a codex including writings ascribed to Justin Martyr. This MS became the possession of J. Reuchlin in the early 16th century and was passed on to a monastery in Maursmünster, Alsace, in 1560.[265] From there it was passed on to Strasbourg in the 1790s, where it was kept until its destruction when the library burned in the Franco-Prussian war. The epistle survives in several transcriptions, and was copied for print in 1592. The first copy, which was discovered in Tübingen in 1880, was made by Haus in 1580. Beurer's now lost copy is from around 1590 (Freiburg). Two critical collations of the manuscript were made by Cunitz and Reuss in 1861. These were published in Otto's *Corpus Apologeticum*. The Strasbourg-MS had been damaged before the first copies was made, though, especially in the middle of the text, where approximately two lines are missing. Since all copies of the MS are based on the Strasbourg-MS, these parts of the text should be considered lost.

262*AdDiog.* 1.1
263Roberts-Donaldson 1885, p. 23.
264Kirsopp Lake 1912, p. 348
265Meecham 1949, p. 68

It has often been argued that only §1-10 of the epistle can be considered original,[266] though some have claimed that the text should be considered one coherent whole by one author.[267] Barnard lists a range of reasons rendering the latter claim dubious.[268] Not least, the alleged recipients are clearly different: §1-10 are addressed to a Pagan, presumably without any knowledge of Christianity, while §11-12 seems more like to have been addressed to catechumens or a similar audience with a more intimate knowledge of Christian doctrines. Moreover, there is a difference in the attitude towards Judaism. §1-10 is mostly negative, while §11-12 describes Old Testament prophecy in more favorable terms. No New Testament quotations are present in §1-10, in contrast to §12.5, and the literary style of §11-12 differs from the preceding, for example by its sparse use of particles. Barnard argues, however, that this should not lead to the traditional conclusion that the epistle has two different authors. Rather, the sections have been written on different occasions, but by the same author. We do not need to go into the details of Barnard's (counter-)arguments here, since the following discussions will primarily focus on elements in §1-10. For this discussion, what is relevant is the identification of the rhetorical situation and thus an approximate dating for §1-10. Hence, it will be sufficient to note that assuming a difference with regards to the recipient and rhetorical context of the two sections of text can account for much of the internal differences.

For §1-10, most scholars have, for the above reasons, argued for a dating in the early 2nd century. Harnack has argued for a slightly later dating, between 170-400, while Zahn gives an even later dating between 250-310. Overbeck goes so far as calling the writing post-Constantinian.[269]

Because of the context of the MS in a codex ascribed to Justin Martyr, the author of §1-10 has traditionally been believed to be Justin. Others have argued that the similarities with the apology of Aristides makes him the probable author. Bonwetsch argues that Hippolytus was the author of §11-12.[270] It is now generally agreed that the author of §1-10 must be considered unknown (the same is the case with §11-12).[271]

It has also been suggested that, since the style is "rhetorical in the extreme"[272], the epistle could be an "academic treatise" or "the exercise of some young

266Meecham 1949, p. 66
267Marrou 1965, pp. 219-229; Thierry 1966, p. 146
268Barnard 1965, p. 131
269Overbeck 1872
270Bonwetsch 1902
271Foster 2007
272Kirsopp Lake 1912, p. 348

theologian”[273]. This would also explain why the epistle has been unknown in Patristic and medieval literature. But at any rate, the exact dating and identification of the author(s) of the epistle is, mostly, not of primary relevance for the present study. The following discussion will be based on a reading of the possible negative theology and ethical elements of §1-10, as these relate to certain theological, epistemological, as well as anthropological aspects of the text. For these purposes it is sufficient to presuppose that the text was written before the 4th century with largely rhetorical purposes, though still containing significant theological and philosophical points. Since the author of the epistle is unknown, (s)he will be referred to simply as 'the author'.

Fundamental structure, claims and arguments

The following summarizes the structure and claims in the epistle in so far as they are relevant for further discussions, in order to give an overall view. Hence important points will be dealt with in more detail below.

The author opens the epistle with an address to “the most excellent Diognetus (κράτιστε Διόγνητε)”, a Pagan who has allegedly asked for information about the Christian “mode of worshiping God (τὴν θεοσέβειαν τῶν Χριστιανῶν)”. After this short prooemium the author sets out to refute the Pagan worship of idols, in a manner sometimes reminiscent of Jewish prophetic literature, e.g. Isaiah 2:8. Where other early Christian apologetics often apply philosophical, theological and ethical arguments by attacking the lack of true divinity (e.g. the mortality or mutability) and the corrupt morality of the Hellenistic gods (e.g. in Aristides, Barnabas, etc.), the author focuses strictly on the corporeality of the idols (i.e. the statues) themselves and the absurdity of worshiping such idols. By worshiping statues and images made of dead, mutable “materials (ὕλης)”[274] the Pagans become enslaved, and finally like (ἐξομοιοῦσθε), to these.

Having exposed the absurdity of the Pagans’ (alleged) worship of images and statues, the author turns to Jewish modes of “worship (λατρείας)”[275]. Jewish worship has the advantage of not being centered on dead images. Hence, the author in this polemic focuses more strictly on the practices and rituals of Jewish worship than their immediate object. These practices are, however, as condemnable as the Pagans’, since they, according to the author, presuppose that God is in need of sacrifices, circumcision and the keeping of certain days. It is not

273Kirsopp Lake 1912, p. 348
274*AdDiog.* 2.3
275*AdDiog.* 3.1-4.6

least the “meddlesomeness (πολυπραγμοσύνης)”[276] reflected in Jewish practices that is subject to critique.

Though the author's criticisms of Pagan and Jewish worship differ, both instances build upon certain implicit philosophical and theological premises. These questions will be discussed in detail below.

Having made his stand on Pagan and Jewish worship clear, the author moves from the polemical to a somewhat more positive clarification of what Christian religion consists in.[277] But only somewhat, since a central point of §5 is that Christian worship differs from Pagan and Jewish in being indistinguishable from others. The “godliness (ἡ θεοσέβεια)” of the Christians is “invisible (ἀόρατος)”.[278] As such it cannot be described in positive terms, though it is “confessedly contradicting expectation” ὁμολογουμένως παράδοξον ἐνδείκνυνται)”[279]. Hence the situation of Christians in the world is described in paradoxes[280]. Christians love all men but are persecuted by all, ignored and yet condemned, dishonored but glorified, etc.[281] Many of these paradoxes share a structural similarity with the Beatitudes in Matt 5:3-12 and Luk 6:20-22, by contrasting condition and result.[282] But the most striking paradoxes are found in the continuous allusions to what could be called the Christians’ ambassadorship in the world. In a manner much similar to 1 Peter,[283] the author notes that the Christians “dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners”, and that for them “[e]very foreign country is a fatherland”, but “every fatherland is foreign”[284]. The Christians “pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven”[285] and while they “obey the established laws [...] they surpass the laws in their own lives.”[286] In §6.1-6.9 the author unfolds this theme by analogizing the situation of the Christians (what we have called ‘ambassadorship’) with the relation of the soul to the body. The author notes that the Christian religion (θεοσέβεια) is invisibly present in the world, as the soul is invisibly present in the body, and that as the soul holds the body together, so Christians hold the world together.[287]

276Or “fussiness”, tr. Kirsopp Lake. *AdDiog.* 4.6
277*AdDiog.* 5.1-6.10
278*AdDiog.* 6.4
279*AdDiog.* 5.4
280See below for a discussion of this term.
281*AdDiog.* 5.11; 5.12; 5.14
282For example: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”, Matt 5:11, NIV)
283For example: “Beloved, I beseech you as sojourners and pilgrims (ὡς παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμους)”. 1 Pet 2:11, ASV
284*AdDiog.* 5.5, tr. Lightfoot
285*AdDiog.* 5.9, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
286*AdDiog.* 5.10, Lightfoot
287*AdDiog.* 6.4, 6.7

Below it will be argued that these ‘paradoxes’ of Christian ‘ambassadorship’ form what could be called an ‘ethics of invisibility’. Moreover it will be discussed to what degree the use of the soul-body analogy reveals a certain anthropology or whether its use is more narrowly rhetorical, in order to make it clear what exactly the analogy consists in (e.g. is it the whole Christian ‘person’, body, spirit and soul etc., that can be compared to the soul?). This should help to clarify the possible contents of the epistle's ‘ethics of invisibility’.

In §7 the author deals with how the “Invisible God Himself”[288] revealed the Son, “the very Artificer and Creator of the Universe”[289]. An important point here is that the Son did not come to “establish a sovereignty, to inspire fear and terror”[290], but “in gentleness [and] meekness [...] using persuasion, not force”[291]. After a lacuna in the text (in §7.6) and some further remarks about the situation of the Christians in the world, the author continues in §8 with a polemical excourse against the 'philosophers' and human wisdom in general.[292] No man has seen God, but He revealed himself through faith.[293] Hence ‘invisibility’ is arguably used as a general (anti-)epistemic term, more or less synonymous, we might assume, to 'unknowable' or 'ineffable' in other texts.

After this follows logically §9 which is mostly Christological and soteriological. God had from the beginning planned to send his Son, but God let humanity abound in sin, so that it would be clear that we could not be made worthy to life by our own deeds, the author argues.[294] As in §7-8, these points have somewhat epistemological implications, or as we might put it ‘meta-noetical’ (having to do with repentance), as when the author notes that “having made clear our inability to enter into the kingdom of God of ourselves, [we] might be enabled by the ability of God”[295]. §7-9 are relevant for the discussion of negative theology in the epistle. The theology in these chapters could in a certain sense be called ‘dialectical’.

The last (known) chapter of what is generally considered as the original epistle (as discussed above), is somewhat more parenetic. Hence §10 starts with a personal invitation to apprehend “full knowledge of the Father”[296]. By gaining such knowledge Diognetus (or whoever the recipient is) will be filled with joy and love for God which will eventually make him “an imitator of His goodness”, an “imitator

288 *AdDiog.* 7.2, tr. Lightfoot
289 *AdDiog.* 7.2, tr. Lightfoot
290 *AdDiog.* 7.3, Lightfoot
291 *AdDiog.* 7.4, Lightfoot
292 *AdDiog.* 8.2
293 *AdDiog.* 8.5-8.6
294 *AdDiog.* 9.1
295 *AdDiog.* 9.1, tr. Lightfoot
296 *AdDiog.* 10.1, tr. Lightfoot

of God”[297]. Such imitation is by the author described as analogical (though not in the technical sense) to God’s love for humankind. Imitation of God consists in love for one’s neighbor, and through such love one becomes a god to others. §10 is especially relevant with its talk of imitation, since this suggests that the theology of the epistle has ethical consequences in a way which seems to create a tension with the ‘ethics of invisibility’ (should Christians, e.g., in some way imitate God’s self-revealing character?). To what degree the negative theology and epistemological points of especially §9 plays a role in such ethics will also be discussed.

Finally we have the merged §11-12. In these the author claims to be a “disciple of apostles”. There are undoubtedly some conceptual and structural likenesses with the Pauline letters, but there are obvious differences in theology and terminology as well. Though the epistle is not as ‘Pauline’ as might be expected, it shares central elements. This is especially the case for those elements which are relevant for the present purpose. In §12.3-12.8 the author, based on Gen 2:9, discusses the relationship between “knowledge” (γνῶσις) and “true life (ζωῆς ἀληθοῦς)”. There is no knowledge without true life, and *vice versa*.[298] Hence the author beseeches: “Let your heart be your wisdom; and let your life be true knowledge inwardly received.”[299] The theology in §1-10 and its ethical implications can be treated adequately without mention of §11-12. Hence these chapters will not be discussed further.

Negative theology as polemical strategy

The following discusses the arguments applied by the author in his polemics against Pagan and Jewish religion. What is interesting here is not so much the arguments themselves, as the premises which they are implicitly based on.

Arguments against Pagan worship

The author's polemics against Paganism[300] starts with an exhortation for Diognetus to “clear (καθάρας)” himself from “all the prepossessions which occupy thy mind” (προκατεχόντων σου τὴν διάνοιαν λογισμῶν), and to “throw off the habit which leadeth thee astray (ἀπατῶσάν σε συνήθειαν ἀποσκευασάμενος)”.[301] Of course such admonitions are common as a rhetorical strategy. But nevertheless

297*AdDiog.* 10.4, tr. Lightfoot
298*AdDiog.* 12.4
299*AdDiog*. 12.7, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
300Non-Judeo-Christian culture, religion and philosophy at large.
301*AdDiog.* 2.1, tr. Lightfoot

we see that the polemics from the start has an indirect, negative epistemological content, which might prove to be more than just rhetorically relevant. We should note that “clear (καθάρας)” is in adjective form, genitive, making the verb implicit. Roberts-Donaldson translates as “*after* you have freed yourself [...] come and contemplate”, while Lightfoot has the imperative “*clear* thyself [...] see”. Lightfoot’s translation seems the more reasonable, since the adjacent criticism of the Pagan gods (starting in §2.2) could be thought of as this clearance itself (or analogous to), as a process, rather than being a discursive insight following upon clearance, and as such as independent thereof (the criticism is the clearance).

In §2.2-2.4 the author makes an unfavorable characteristic of the Pagan sculptures used for worship, “those whom ye declare and deem to be gods (ἐρεῖτε καὶ νομίζετε θεούς)”[302]. These are all “perishable matter (φθαρτῆς ὕλης)”[303], capable of change. Now the author is hardly talking about an opposition between the imperishable God and perishable matter as such (matter understood as a metaphysical category). Rather ‘matter’ here simply refers to the material that sculptures were formed from. It is the fact that this material is still changeable, so that the sculptures can be turned into vessels again, which proves the gods to be perishable.[304] So this point is more practical than metaphysical, so to speak.

It seems fairly obvious that followers of late ancient Hellenic religious cults did not usually believe that the statues used for worship were themselves gods, rather than being means of communicating with the gods. But the author seems to presuppose that Pagans believed the statues to be, in some way, gods in the very concrete sense. The object of the polemics in the argument of the author might as such seem to be a very obvious straw-man. But this strategy says more about the theological views of author than is obvious at first instance, and serves mainly as a means of introducing the theology of the post-polemical chapters of the epistle. What is critical here is the sharp distinction between the divine and the corporeal (and, might we assume, everything else created), which makes all mediation or ‘iconicity’ impossible. This is arguably an instance of what we have called the ‘Judeo-Christian distinction’.

The Pagan statues are described primarily with negative definitions. In addition to being perishable the Pagan gods are described as being “dumb (κωφὰ)” “blind (τυφλά)”, “soulless (ἄψυχα)”, “senseless (ἀναίσθητα)” and “motionless (ἀκίνητα)”.[305] It is somewhat obvious that these are all terms that describe

302*AdDiog.* 2.2, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
303*AdDiog.* 2.3, tr. Lightfoot
304*AdDiog.* 2.4
305*AdDiog.* 2.4

negative qualities in the sense of privation, i.e. the lack of certain properties. This is more than simply negative definitions (it is στέρησις rather than ἀπόφασις or ἀφαίρεσις). The author does not explicit claim this, but the privative alpha present in three of the terms, and the rhetorical situation as such (designed to diminish the worth of the Pagan gods) suggests that this is the case. In contrast, the Christian God is described as having "sensibility (αἴσθησιν)" and "reason (λογισμόν)", terms that are hardly negative definitions.[306]

This polemicism does not mean that the Christian concept of God is not also in some way defined in negative terms. Palmer argues that the author's polemical use of negative definitions when referring to the Pagan gods is "a sort of inverted negative theology", but that this does not mean that the Christian definition of God is positive. It might as well be implicitly negative: "The implications of this critique for a Christian concept of God-namely, that God is immaterial, imperishable, etc.-are not spelled out."[307]

Hence it seems that there are no explicit signs of 'negative theology' in §2, if by this we understand the linguistic strategy of using negative definitions when describing God. What we do find, however, is what could be called a rhetorical *apophaticism*.[308] By criticizing and negating the value of the Pagan gods the author enables the coming introduction of his own positive doctrines. This strategy is somewhat explicit, due to the remarks in §2.1, especially if these are interpreted (as suggested above) as an exhortation to partake in a process of intellectual clearance, a process realized in the rest of §2. So while these chapters does not represent a negative theology, they represent rather a structural *apophaticism* that at least allows such theology to be introduced. As we shall see, it is exactly the revealed, positive properties of God that are somewhat paradoxically accompanied by his invisibility, which shape the relationship of the Christians to the world (the negation of the Pagan gods' privative properties by the positive properties of God in §2 is implicitly also a negation of the Pagan gods' positive properties by the negatively defined properties of God).

In the remaining sections of §2, the author shifts focus from the criticism of the Pagan gods themselves to the Pagan practices and handling of their gods. The author basically presents two critical states of affairs, namely, on the one hand, that the Pagans have to guard their gods to protect them, and thereby actually insult them, and, on the other, that no sensible person would accept the sacrifices

306*AdDiog.* 2.9
307Palmer 1983, pp. 238-239
308By ἀπόφασις we mean here saying something indirectly through negation, not the rhetorical figure ἀπόφασις in the strict sense.

offered to the gods, whereby the Pagans implicitly acknowledge the insensibility of their gods.[309] Whether or not these criticisms are logically 'sound' they imply the, for the present purpose, interesting assumptions that 1) the ontological character of one's god has direct behavioral consequences, and 2) the Pagan practices imply their own criticism. If successful, these two points form both a practical and theoretical (if not narrowly 'logical') *reductio ad absurdum.*

Arguments against the Jews

Since the recipient (Diognetus) is allegedly a Pagan, it can seem strange that the polemics against Judaism (§3.1-§4.6) is more extensive than that against Paganism. One explanation could be that Diognetus, as a Pagan, is likely to carry a dislike of Judaism, and that distinguishing Christians from Jews is therefore crucial before a positive apologetic can be carried out. Another explanation could be that the audience is in fact Christians, and therefore need to define themselves negatively in relation to Judaism. At any rate, the arguments against Judaism carries important theological premises.

In the polemics against Judaism the author acknowledges the fact that Jews "deem it proper to worship one God as being Lord of all"[310]. Soon, however, the Jews are criticized for worshiping in modes similar to the Pagan, which the Jews ought to count as "folly (μωρίαν)".[311]

The arguments against Judaism are, like those against Paganism, designed to expose the inconsistencies and irrationality of Judaism, hence to refute *ad absurdum.* Where Pagan worship is absurd because the Pagan gods, being senseless, are not able to accept sacrifices, Jewish worship is absurd because God does not need any sacrifices.[312] To reject some of God's creations as useless is impious, and God does not forbid doing good on the sabbath.[313] The Jewish "observance of months and of days" is a product of "their own impulses (αὐτῶν ὀρμάς)"[314]. But since God is in need of nothing ("τῷ μηδενὸς προσδεομένῳ"[315]), the practices of the Jews must be build on "superstition (δεισιδαιμονίαν)"[316].

Now what is meant by the term δεισιδαιμονίαν? Obviously, though the term etymologically refers to 'religion' in the sense of respect or fear for 'daemons',[317] it

309*AdDiog.* 2.7, 2.9
310*AdDiog.* 3.2, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
311*AdDiog.* 3.2, 3.3
312*AdDiog.* 3.5
313*AdDiog.* 4.2, 4.3
314*AdDiog.* 4.5, tr. Lightfoot
315*AdDiog.* 3.5
316*AdDiog.* 4.1, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
317For example 'δεισιδαιμονεστέρους' is often translated as 'religious' in Acts 17:22

is unlikely that the author believes something like this to apply to Jewish worship. As noted the author criticizes the Jewish observance of months and days for being a product of “their own impulses” (αὐτῶν ὀρμάς). But the ‘superstition’ of the Jews does not so much result from a fear of something external (e.g. daemons), as from ‘pride', or perhaps the ‘projection’ of values (something internal), to use modern psychological *lingua*. A central point of criticism against the Jews is their pride and “πολυπραγμοσύνης”.[318] How are we to understand this term, which basically means something like being busy, or going about with, many activities or things? Translations suggest “busy-body spirit” (Roberts-Donaldson), or “fussiness” (Lightfoot, Kirsopp Lake). In late antiquity the term also had the meaning of curiosity or search for knowledge. But such an understanding seems to be too intellectualistic. Rather, the ‘superstition’ (“δεισιδαιμονίαν”) in §4.1 should be kept in mind. Maybe the plurality of ‘daemons’ correspond to the plurality of ‘things’? Moreover, in the context (”τῆς Ἰουδαίων πολυπραγμοσύνης καὶ ἀλαζονείας”), we see the term related to ‘pride’ (Lightfoot) or ‘vainful boasting’ (Roberts-Donaldson), which suggests some degree of public aspect to the Jews’ going about with many things (πολυπραγμοσύνης). Hence ‘officiousness’ might be the more fitting term.

The main criticism against the Jews is not, as one might have thought, their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth as Christ, but their superstition. That the former is not mentioned in the polemical chapters against the Jews is reasonably due to the fact the recipient, being a Pagan, would have considered such points nonsensical, or an irrelevant internal discussion between Christians and Jews (which of course counts in favor of the view that the epistle is actually addressed to Diognetus). The unqualified rejection of Jewish ‘superstition’ is noticeable, since this seems to imply a total rejection of the Old Testament canon and the idea of the Jews as God’s chosen people in a covenant governed by the Law as revealed by God. This is in itself a reason for not dating the epistle too early, to a time when Christianity was still closely associated with Judaism, but to a later time where Christians where clearly distinguished from their Jewish origins.

For the present purpose what is particularly relevant is that this ‘superstition’ seems to be, for the author, the direct result of ‘officiousness’ (and ‘pride’). Though the most proper translation of ‘πολυπραγμοσύνης’ is perhaps not the overtly intellectualizing ‘curiosity’, it is still reasonable to think of the author's criticism as having a basically moral-epistemological content. The author's point is, so to

318*AdDiog.* 4.6

speak, that there is nothing to set a limit to the proud officiousness of the Jews. From this results superstition and, most importantly, a range of all too 'visible' practices (visibility vs. invisibility is no explicit concern in §3-4 but it obviously becomes so in immediate connection hereto). The Jews do have correct beliefs about God, but this does not keep them from making up superstitious practices. So what we see here is not so much, as in the case of the Pagans, how certain theological assumptions produce a specific ethics. What we see is rather how the lack of certain limiting assumptions (something of whatever kind that sets a limit to pride, e.g. revelation) may be an enabling condition for certain practices, despite of actually held, correct theological assumptions. These negative 'limiting assumptions' should be kept in mind when we deal with the apologetic chapters of the epistle.

A remark on the mystery of Christian religion

One could reasonably think that after such polemics against Pagan and Jewish religion, would come a positive (in the sense of affirmative) description of the qualities of Christian religion. The author closes §4, however, by noting about Christians, that "as regards the mystery of their own religion, expect not that thou canst be instructed by man (ἀνθρώπου)."[319] Roberts-Donaldson translates ἀνθρώπου as "any mortal"[320]. The reason seems to be that this would imply that only God can reveal the Christian mysteries. There is nothing suggesting, by the way, that the author does not include himself in this category.

The author mentions "the mystery of their own religion" rather than simply "their own religion", which could be interpreted as saying that while the mystery 'beneath' the Christian religion cannot be described (whatever that mystery might be), this need not be the case for Christian religion as a visible practice or similar. But the context makes this implausible, since, as we have seen, Christian religion is contrasted with Pagan and Jewish beliefs as well as practices in their entirety. Hence accordingly 'mystery' probably refers to the Christian religion in general. As will be clear from the following, the description of Christian religion in §5-6 clearly supports this claim.

The remark in §4.6 seems to have two functions having to do with the *apophatic* strategy mentioned. The first is a fairly obvious example of negative theology, in that the claim that it is not possible to "be instructed by man", easily yields the notion that the only true instruction can come from the revelation of God himself,

319*AdDiog.* 4.6, tr. Lightfoot
320*AdDiog.* 4.6, tr. Roberts-Donaldson

though this is of course not claimed explicitly (yet!). The second function rather establishes what we could call a 'pre-*apophatic* structure', so to speak (hinted at above). The claim that instruction is not possible from man seems to contradict the author's readiness in §1.1 to answer Diognetus' curiosity to "understand the religion of the Christians"[321]. But §4.6 could be interpreted as claiming that such understanding cannot come by any directly positive instructions. In other words, the tension created by the combination of §1.1 and §4.6 establishes a 'structure' which means that the subsequent description of the Christians' invisibility in the world will easily be interpreted as more than a simple negation of the possibility of knowledge about Christian religion. This structure, in other words, creates the context that is necessary for a negative theology to take place.

As for now, we should take it for granted that the remark in §4.6. means that the premise of the following exposition of Christian religion is that it cannot be described in positive terms.

The dialectics of knowledge and faith

Throughout the epistle is repeatedly upheld a clear distinction between revealed truth and human doctrines. For example when the author notes that Christians do not possess "any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men (ἐπινοίᾳ τινὶ καὶ φροντίδι πολυπραγμόνων ἀνθρώπων)"[322]. This is evident in the polemical sections as well as in the apologetic sections (ethical as well as Christological). The point seems to be that there can be no positive, true theology without revelation. In this sense negative claims about theological knowledge becomes the presupposition for a revelation theology.

After his polemics against Pagan and Jewish modes of worship the author in a set of paradoxical statements exemplifies how the Christians are invisible in the world. This will be discussed in detail below, but first we will discuss the polemics against philosophy in §8. In §8 the author resumes his polemics, which is now directed against the "pretentious philosophers (τῶν ἀξιοπίστων φιλοσόφων)"[323]. The mere plurality of philosophical views is here used as an argument against philosophy as such, though the author especially seems to have natural philosophy in mind. If any of these theories ("λόγων") are plausible ("ἀπόδεκτός"), then anything in creation might potentially be divine. But the invisibility of God is again held up as an argument: "no man has either seen or recognised Him, but He

321*AdDiog.* 1.1, tr. Lightfoot
322*AdDiog.* 5.3, tr. Lightfoot
323*AdDiog.* 8.2, tr. Lightfoot

revealed Himself (οὔτε <εἶδεν> οὔτε ἐγνώρισεν)”[324].

Only through faith can God be seen or recognized. In other words, the ‘medium’ of God’s revelation is faith, i.e. God reveals through faith (“Ἐπέδειξε δὲ διὰ πίστεως”[325]). Hence we are far from, e.g., the idea of faith as a “voluntary preconception” leading to knowledge.[326] It is not that we find any particular ‘doctrine’ of faith in the epistle, the author only uses the word twice. The second instance is in §10.1, where we get the impression that the precondition of faith is “knowledge (ἐπιγνώσῃ)”[327], though ‘recognition’ or ‘acknowledgement’ might be a more suitable interpretation (due to the prefix ἐπι-). This priority of ἐπιγνώσῃ before τὴν πίστιν, by the way, seems more or less to be the opposite of the Alexandrian (Clementine) scheme, where γνώσις is a particularly high state of knowledge following upon faith (”voluntary preconception”).

It is important that this positive notion of knowledge (“ἐπιγνώσῃ”) in §10.1 is introduced as following upon the many unfavorable expositions of the theories (“λόγους”) of the philosophers, and human doctrine and wisdom in general in §8-9.[328] The point seems to be that this positive knowledge about God does not come about until human wisdom has been proved to be ineffective. God has “kept and guarded His wise design as a mystery”[329] until it was revealed through his Son. The purpose of this is to prepare us for conversion:

> “[…]being convicted in the past time by our own deeds as unworthy of life, we might now be made deserving by the goodness of God, and having made clear our inability to enter into the kingdom of God of ourselves, might be enabled by the ability of God.”[330]

Again we see a close connection between doctrine and practice. Because of having wrong notions about God (and whatever else), the practices of humanity were shaped in a way leading to death. By this result humankind is proven to be 'unworthy of life'. Death and life is, so to speak, the pragmatic measure of knowledge. Not having the right knowledge leads to death, but only then is the 'wrongness' of one's conceptions made clear. An important term here is ‘ἐλεγχθέντες’, translatable as ‘convicted’ (Lightfoot), ‘convinced’ (Roberts-Donalson), ‘proved’ (Kirsop-Lake). The construction of the sentence seems to

324 *AdDiog.* 8.5, tr. Lightfoot
325 *AdDiog.* 8.6
326 This is the idea of Clement of Alexandria. See *Str.* 2.2
327 *AdDiog.* 10.1, tr. Lightfoot, Roberts-Donaldson
328 This might very well be a reference to the sophists whose doctrines according to Plato was on words (λόγοι) rather than things. Plato, *Gorgias.*
329 *AdDiog.* 8.10, tr. Lightfoot
330 *AdDiog.* 9.1, tr. Lightfoot

construe this ‘conviction’ as a more or less passive state or event, resulting from the sheer inevitable fact of the reality of death in human life. On the other hand, “having made clear our” (ἑαυτοὺς φανερώσαντες) might seem to suggest an active side to the coming to being of this conviction, though it could just as well be God who is the subject of this 'making clear'. The author's words §9.6 also suggests that this is the case:

> “Having then in the former time (πρόσθεν χρόνῳ) demonstrated (Ἐλέγξας) the inability (τὸ ἀδύνατον) of our nature to obtain life, and having now revealed a Saviour able (δυνατὸν) to save even that which have no ability (τὰ ἀδύνατα), He willed that for both reasons we should believe in His goodness and should regard Him as nurse, father, teacher, counsellor, physician, mind, light, honour, glory, strength and life.”[331]

Notice that there seems to be no negative names of God in this passage. The reason for this is, arguably, that all these names refer to God's activities, and not his essence. This seems to presuppose the Judeo-Christian distinction (see below).

As a side remark we could notice that the author's words in §9.6 might seem similar to Irenaeus who writes that:

> “God had mercy upon His creation, and bestowed upon them a new salvation through His Word, that is, Christ, so that men might learn by experience that they cannot attain to incorruption of themselves, but by God's grace only.”[332]

The similarity consists in this that it is by experience that human beings come to know both their own inadequacy and the grace of God, and that both elements of the Gospel. There is an important difference between the two, though. Irenaeus seems to be claiming that it is the positive revelation of Christ that itself leads to knowledge of the negative point, that humankind cannot save itself. In contrast to this the author seems to be saying that this negative knowledge is brought about “in the former time (τῷ πρόσθεν χρόνῳ)”[333], i.e. before God’s revelation of his Son.

Now, it seems fairly obvious that it is God who “demonstrated” (Ἐλέγξας) the inability of human nature to obtain life by itself. This ‘demonstration’ is not neutral, since ἐλέγχω means to demonstrate in the negative sense, reproof, refute or even to disgrace.[334] But God does not reproof actively, but by holding back, by hiding himself. Hence God demonstrates the inability of humankind to save itself

331*AdDiog.* 9.6, tr. Lightfoot, modified
332Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5. 21.3
333*AdDiog.* 9.6
334LSJ, ”ἐλέγχω”

passively, so to speak, by not saving it. While it is still God himself who demonstrates the inability of humankind, this seems to allow for a greater emphasis on the activity of humankind, who must be the one who acts and gains experience, albeit in vain attempts at attaining life by its own deeds.

It is also God that ‘shows forth’ (δείξας) the alternative, the savior who is able to save “creatures which have no ability” (Lightfoot) (τὸν σωτῆρα δείξας δυνατὸν σώζειν καὶ τὰ ἀδύνατα). This could also be given the more pointed translation as “able to save even those things which it was [formerly] impossible to save” (Roberts-Donaldson), or even simply that God has revealed (brought to light, δείξας) a savior able to save 'the impossible'. But where God demonstrates the negative fact of humankind’s inability by not acting, this ‘showing forth’ of a positive fact is an active doing by God.

It is this almost paradoxical two-foldedness that is the object of the knowledge which is the precondition of faith. The demonstration of the inability of human nature to obtain life by itself is the content of God's all-embracing judgment over humankind, while his revelation of a savior is the revelation of salvation for the self-same humankind. Notice again that we are talking about knowledge in the sense of 'acknowledgement' (ἐπιγνώσῃ). Hence we do not necessarily (hardly!) have to do with propositional knowledge, from which is 'deduced' faith. The author does not speak about this two-foldedness as premises from which we deduce a conclusion, but he simply says that out of both (ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων) God willed (ἐβουλήθη) us to come to faith (πιστεύειν). Neither are we talking about an intuitive insight into the mysteries of God (would not such insight be a '*gnosis*' rather than an '*epi-gnosis*'?). If such insights come, they only come later, as a result of faith and the imitation of the divine love (as in §10.7, see below).

Rather, we are talking about the dialectical mechanisms that produce the epistemological preconditions of faith. The elements of this mechanism is reproof (from ἐλέγξας) and proof (from δείξας), to put it squarely. As soon as both elements have been established we find an *apophatic* (indirect through negation) structure similar to that discussed in relation to the first polemical chapters. This means that the knowledge of God’s positive revelation in some way implies or ‘contains’ the negative knowledge of God’s reproof and *vice versa*. It is, to be sure, only after the establishment of this structure that *apophaticism* becomes possible. Negative theology is, in the epistle, not a way of doing natural theology with alternative means, but the presupposed structure for a revealed theology.

The immediate result of the attainment of the “full knowledge” is “joy (χαρᾶς)”[335], which is (it seems) basically a form of love for God: “Or, how will you love Him who has first so loved you?”[336], the author asks rhetorically. It does not seem to be the case, however, that this love follows mechanically, by necessity, since the author says that God willed (“ἐβουλήθη”) “that for both reasons we should believe”. There is some need for voluntary acceptance of this knowledge, which also fits with the claim that by sending his Son, God sought to “persuade, not to compel us”[337], though maybe not so much in the active, Clementine sense of faith as *prolepsis*. The author's claims in §10.3 seems to imply that the love for God rises with at least some degree of spontaneity from the knowledge of Him. Hence the role of the human will in faith arguably has to do with more or less passively accepting this spontaneity (maybe as not ‘fighting against’) rather than an active voluntary choice to have faith.

Imitation of God, Christian virtues and the character and possibility of ethical principles

The following chapters discusses what we might understand by Christian ethics. The first part will deal with the question of what the actual contents of imitation (“μιμητὴς [...] Θεοῦ”[338]) is in the epistle. By doing this we turn the chronology of the epistle on its head. In the epistle the 'lifestyle' of the Christians is described before the more specific claims about their imitation of God is put forth. This has a rhetorical advantage, but for systematic reasons we will start with considering the idea of imitation before discussing its concrete consequences. In other words we will start with meta-ethics, before discussing ethics.

When we have some idea of what the Christian virtues might look like, we also become able to address the question, of whether or not the Christians does really only live by the rules, customs and laws of the world, or whether it is possible to formulate an ethics (a set of ethical principles) on the background of the proposed virtues. If it is, then the question immediately raised is to what degree such ethics is compatible with the customs, norms and laws of the world?

Again the negative character of the Christian theology is central. On the one hand Christians are to be known exactly by the fact that they are ‘invisible’. On the other they are to imitate the incarnate logos as it reveals itself in a concrete history and relatedness to human beings in the world.

335*AdDiog.* 10.3, tr. Lightfoot
336*AdDiog*. 10.3, tr. Lightfoot
337*AdDiog.* 7.4, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
338*AdDiog.* 10.4

Imitating God

From the love that grows from the knowledge ("Ἐπιγνοὺς"[339]) of God's saving works follows imitation (§10.4-6). Hence we turn to the theme of imitating God ("μιμητὴς [...] Θεοῦ"). This is a central theme in the epistle, since the author seems to equate 'happiness' with imitation of God.[340] The latter is not simply a means to happiness, soon to be thrown away, or an optional element in the Christian life, suitable for some, but rather the whole point of the Christian 'mode of worship' as such.

Of course we cannot take for granted that the author presupposes the 'standard' *eudaimonistic* idea of happiness as the purpose of human life and the aim of human practices and ethics. That the author does mention happiness can simply be due to the fact the he expects the recipient to be familiar with a *eudaimonistic* framework and terminology.

That to be happy (εὐδαιμονεῖν) is closely related to imitation of God is not something that the author states expressly in positive terms. But in §10.5 he lists a range of activities, practices, and so on, that are identified with not 'to be happy':

> "For it is not by ruling over his neighbours, or by seeking to hold the supremacy over those that are weaker, or by being rich, and showing violence towards those that are inferior, that happiness is found (εὐδαιμονεῖν ἐστίν); nor can any one by these things become an imitator of God (τις μιμήσασθαι Θεόν)."[341]

Hence in §10.5 the closest we get to a definition of happiness is in negative terms. In §10.6 we get a positive definition of what it means to imitate God, but happiness is not mentioned. It seems reasonable to presuppose, however, that as §10.5 identifies not to be happy with not imitating God, a symmetric identification is implied in §10.6, so that happiness is conceived as consisting in imitation of God.[342]

Before discussing the actual contents of imitation, we might ask what exactly it means to 'imitate' something, according to the author? Already during the polemics against Paganism the author utilized an idea of likeness, though in a polemical, negative sense. In §2 the author claimed that Pagan worshipers become

339 *AdDiog.* 10.3
340 *AdDiog.* 10.5-10.6. Being happy, "εὐδαιμονεῖν".
341 *AdDiog.* 10.5, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
342 To put it squarely, even though ~a=>~b does not mean that a=>b (that not imitating God does not lead to happiness does not logically mean that imitating God leads to happiness), the rhetorical context seems to imply such an inference, or at least claim, however.

“altogether like unto (τέλεον δ’ αὐτοῖς ἐξομοιοῦσθε)”[343] the sculptures that they worship, i.e. subject to change, “dumb (κωφὰ)” “blind (τυφλά)”, “soulless (ἄψυχα)”, “senseless (ἀναίσθητα)” and “motionless (ἀκίνητα)”.[344] Hence we see that a theme of likeness is introduced already in the polemical sections of the epistle. But it is only in §10.4 that such a theme is introduced in a positive sense, of imitating God.

Such language seems to have an origin not in Biblical literature, but in philosophical traditions, especially Platonism and Pythagoreanism, as well as in Philo.[345] As such the language of imitation was common, as was the vocabulary based in conceptions of *eudaimonia*.

Heintz concludes that “[…]the idea as found in *The Epistle to Diognetus* seems less dependent upon either Paul or Ignatius than upon ideas current in Hellenistic philosophy.”[346] Heintz nevertheless argues that “a subtle shift” takes place in the way the language of imitation of God is applied in the epistle. Imitation of God, Heintz notes, is in the epistle not a question of imitating a disembodied divine impassibility, but of following the incarnated Logos. Heinz is arguably right, even if the author gives God the names “Nourisher, Father, Teacher, Counsellor, Healer, our Wisdom, Light, Honour, Glory, Power, and Life”[347]. These names might seem like abstract properties of the divine nature as such. This is hardly the case, though. They are something that we can only apply to God, when we acknowledge that he has revealed his plan of salvation (before this he seemed to be quite different, not caring).[348] Hence all these names refer to particular activities of God in relation to us, not abstract properties. This means that imitation of God does not mean acquiring characteristics in the abstract or essentially, but is always related to a concrete context and narrative.

Imitation of God means attaining a likeness to the incarnate Logos, the concrete actions of God in the life of Jesus Christ. What facilitates such imitation is not a self-disciplined growth in virtue, but the intervention of God himself in the Logos. To what degree the possibility of imitation depends on the will of God or the will of the imitator himself is not very clear, however. The author simply states that “δύναται, θέλοντος αὐτοῦ”, which can be translated as “He can, if God willeth

343*AdDiog.* 2.5, tr. Lightfoot
344*AdDiog.* 2.3, 2.4
345See Heintz, Michael: Journal of Early Christian Studies, Volume 12, No. 1, 2004, pp. 107-119
346Heintz 2004, p. 118
347*AdDiog.* 9.6, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
348*AdDiog.* 9.6

it”[349] or “if God wills it, it is possible”[350], but is more precisely translated as “He can, if he is willing”[351], which is much more ambiguous. Other translations even suggest “he can if he himself is willing”[352]. Now, this is of course important for establishing a proper understanding of the role of the will of human beings in salvation.

Heintz argues that in the epistle, “[m]oral living (living in imitation of God) depends upon the knowledge of God revealed in his Son”, and that “neither moral living nor the knowledge of God is the product of human insight or effort”[353]. God acts before human beings can do anything. This does not mean that God's will is absolutely determining, however. In §9.6 the term used for ‘will’ is ἐβουλήθη which is arguably a less determined notion of will than the θέλοντος in §10.4. It seems that in §9.6 God wills, in the sense of wishes,[354] that human beings come to faith as a result of the two-folded knowledge of their own inability to attain life, and God’s plan of salvation. But he does not determine the will of human beings by an irresistible force, as in the later radically anti-Pelagian, Augustinian account.[355] This would also seem to contradict the author's claim that God uses “persuasion, not force”[356]. It might seem that something of the 'Augustinian' kind is rather the case in §10.4. But even if the will of God is understood in a more determinate sense (maybe as decree) here, it is crucial that it is only the possibility or ability (δύναται) of imitation that is willed by God. Even if the human will is to some degree free to choose to imitate God, the author does not hold a ‘moralistic’ view of imitation. He does not set up imitation as a possibility that must be actualized by following a certain set of moral norms (with or without ‘efforts’). Rather imitation seems to follow spontaneously from the love for God that follows from faith, which again (if not resisted, as argued) follows from the twofolded knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις) of God.

Now, if we are right in claiming that the epistle in some sense presupposes the Judeo-Christian distinction, then this would arguably form the fundamental structure of what it means to imitate God. If it is true that the Creator is essentially different from everything else, in such a way that He can be known only through his revelation, then should we not expect this structure to be reflected in the

349*AdDiog.* 10.4, tr. Lightfoot
350*AdDiog.* 10.4, tr. Heintz 2004
351*AdDiog.* 10.4, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
352My translation of Marius Th. Nielsen, *Oldkirkens Ældste Forkyndelse.*
353Heintz 2004, p. 117
354As “ἐλθεῖν” in 1 Tim 2:4
355E.g. Augustine, *Retractiones* 2.61
356*AdDiog.* 7.4, tr. Lightfoot

author's idea of imitation of God? This at least seems to be the case if we re-read §5.1 (the claim that Christians are not distinguished from others) and the subsequent chapter in the light of §10.4 (the claim that Christians imitate God). We shall for now at least assume the plausibility of the idea that Christians in essence, so to speak, imitate the divine essence by being invisible, while in action imitating the divine activities (the incarnate Logos), through neighborly love. This is in a sense verified by the statements in preceding chapters: Our hypothesis is that imitation of God must lead to certain characteristics, which we can find described earlier in the epistle.

Imitation and the epistle’s view of the atonement

We cannot simply reduce the epistle's concept of imitation of God to a matter of imitation of the divine essence versus imitation of the divine activities in general. The significance of the incarnation is to central for this. Rather, in the epistle these two aspects play together in a history of salvation. It is this history that must be imitated. Hence we shall briefly consider the view of the atonement present in the epistle, and how this relates to other aspects in the texts. Because of its theological implications, having a grip on the epistle’s view of the atonement might help us deepen our understanding of what it means to imitate God, and what Christian virtues and thus ethics might be like.[357]

Imitation of God is about imitating God's work of salvation. As the Son forsook power and became a servant to help those in need, Christians should not pursue power, but help those in need.[358] The author's claims in §10.5-10.6 can easily be compared to Jesus' words in Matt 20:25-28, where the conduct of the disciples in relation to (political) power is, as in *The Epistle to Diognetus,* to be shaped after the works of God in the atonement. As the Son did not come to rule but to give his life as a ransom, so the disciples should not pursue power.[359] Similarly the epistle talks of the atonement in terms of ransom (λύτρον).

Hence it would be no surprise that in so far we could find an idea of the atonement, then it would be the version of the 'classical view' known as the 'ransom theory'.[360] In the ‘classical’ view God does not require an offering to satisfy

357We are not here assuming that there was anything like a codified 'Christian virtue ethics' in the 2nd century, comparable to that of, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1a2ae

358*AdDiog.* 10.5-10.6

359Matt 20:28

360According to Gustaf Aulen this was the typical view before Anselm, who in *Cur Deus Homo?*, held that Christ died as an offering (directly) to the Father, satisfying His righteous anger against the sins of humankind from ‘below’ (i.e., as a man). Aulen 1931. Aulen argued that Clement, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, amongst others in the Greek

his anger, as in later theologies, but sends his Son out of love for humankind. By his incarnation, life and death Christ defeats the (cosmic) powers of death, sets humankind free and thereby atones from ‘above’ (as God). The version of this idea known as the 'ransom theory' holds that Christ was paid as a ransom to death or the devil (rather than as an offering to God), who rightly held powers over humankind, who had sold itself by turning from God in sin. Often the ‘ransom theory’ (though maybe not so much a theory as a metaphor) is formulated on the background of some idea of ‘fairness’. By sinning humankind had sold itself to death, which now has a legitimate claim to humankind. But rather than using force to regain his property God plays ‘by the rules’ and pays death with His Son.[361]

The ransom theory seems to be the form of the classical view held by the author of *The Epistle to Diognetus*. God, the author says, was not angry, but send his Son as a ransom (λύτρον). This also fits with the high regard the author seems to have for the laws and customs of the world. Even if the world persecutes Christians these laws and customs are not illegitimate, and should be followed even if they are not made by God, but by sinful human beings. Of course there is a big difference between Christians following the laws of the world and God following some sort of ‘cosmic fairness’ in the atonement. But if we consider the chapters on the Christians’ way of life in §5 in the light of the idea of imitation in §10.4-10.6 the alleged Christian attitude towards the laws and customs of the world described could arguably be read as an expression of such imitation. And with the author's view of the atonement as ransom in mind, such a reading could also shed light on the claim that while Christians “obey the established laws” they at the same time “surpass the laws in their own lives”[362]. As Christ so to speak went ‘under cover’, taking on human flesh, in order to conquer death, albeit in a ‘lawful way’ (borrowing a term from Gregory of Nyssa), the Christians overcome the world exactly when they obey the laws of the world. Imitating God means to submit to the powers of the world, as Christ did, but it also means to defeat these exactly by submitting to them (the apparent paradoxes in §5).

What characterizes the classical view of the atonement, and the ransom theory in particular, is that it is non-violent.[363] This fits well with the ethics in §10.5, where

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tradition, as well as Augustine, held the ransom theory, while the ransom view cannot be explicitly found in for example Athanasius.

361 Hence Gregory of Nyssa writes that: “There was a kind of necessity for Him not to proceed by way of force, but to accomplish our deliverance in a lawful way.” *OrCat.* 22. Similarly the author of *The Epistle to Diognetus* stresses that Christ used “persuasion, not force”. *AdDiog.* 7.4, Lightfoot

362 *AdDiog.* 5.10, tr. Lightfoot

363 See Weaver 2001

power (political rule), wealth and violence are all denounced as being foreign to God. And in so far as the lack of these attributes in God are seen in the light of the atonement, rather than in the abstract, this again affirms that the imitation of God is not an imitation of abstract properties but of the incarnate Logos as it acts in the person of Jesus Christ.

As we have seen, the author of the epistle understands Pagan worship to imply enslavement to dead things.[364] Divine revelation (or rather the epistemologically negative fact that God chooses to hide himself) convicts this as an instance of humanity's desperate attempt at gaining life by it's own deeds. But thereby is also paved the way for the revelation of the divine *logos*, the Son who by paying a ransom to death frees humanity from its sins. If Christians are to imitate, not God in the abstract, but the incarnate the logos, then this narrative must be central for imitation.

Describing the ethics of imitation

So how are we to describe the character of the Christians? If we are to be consequent in following the author's claim in §10.6, that "whosoever by supplying to those that are in want possessions which he received from God becomes a God to those who receive"[365], are we not to conclude that such giving ('supplying') should structurally resemble the revelation of the Logos? If so imitating God should resemble the dialectics of ignorance and revelation discussed above. As God is invisible in a radical (epistemological) sense, but reveals himself, Christians should, by imitating God, paradoxically express their invisibility when practicing love for their neighbors.

The author rejects a consequentialistic idea of virtue, also the common one implied by much virtue ethics, where virtue is a means to happiness. Imitation of God follows more or less spontaneously from the acknowledgment of the Gospel, happiness being a by-product hereof.[366] But this means also that even if imitation of God is (partly) invisible, happiness can be an indirect sign that such imitation takes place.

As quoted above, the author introduces the theme of imitation by correlating this with a negative definition of happiness. The characteristics mentioned in §10.5 and defined as foreign (ἐκτὸς) to God's majesty (μεγαλειότητος), and as incompatible with happiness, can be summed up as power ("lordship over one's

364*AdDiog.* 2.5
365*AdDiog*. 10.6, tr. Lightfoot
366Hence the author follows a common Christian notion of works as the 'fruits' of faith., e.g. Matt 7:17; Rom 5:1-5

neighbours"), wealth ("desiring to have more than weaker men, nor in possessing wealth") and violence ("using force to inferiors").[367] What is most important in §10.5 is, however, that all these belong to a certain type of relation between persons, namely that of superiority and inferiority. As such what we have are relational rather than essential definitions. This fits well with the claim above, that Christian ethics, being an imitation of the incarnate Logos, is related to a certain narrative (the atonement), and thus concrete. When the author gives a positive definition of imitation in §10.6 the same thing is the case:

> "[…]he who takes upon himself the burden of his neighbour; he who, in whatsoever respect he may be superior, is ready to benefit another who is deficient; he who, whatsoever things he has received from God, by distributing these to the needy, becomes a god to those who receive [his benefits]: he is an imitator of God."[368]

One thing that is immediately striking here is that imitating God is equated with becoming a god to others. Hence imitating God results in the imitator to become a god. This might seem to resemble the later language of deification.[369] But deification is for the author not as much a matter of 'growing' in virtue or in other ways becoming 'divine' as it a matter of relating to others in certain manner. We are not talking about becoming any 'god' in the abstract. The author talks about becoming "a god to those who receive", so being a god is relationally defined. Understanding what it means to become 'a god' to others always presupposes the narrative of the incarnate logos, the Son of the patient and loving God, that becomes a servant for humankind. As God became a servant, the servant will become a god, we might say.

As noted the author describes God with the names "Nourisher, Father, Teacher, Counsellor, Healer, our Wisdom, Light, Honour, Glory, Power, and Life"[370]. These are, of course, all 'biblical' terms. But what does it mean to imitate these properties? If we are right that they are not abstract properties, but refer to God's activities in the world, then in general imitation of these must mean that in its positive aspect, imitation of God is always a relational, concrete matter. In its negative aspect, imitation means in some way staying invisible even as these relations unfolds.

If Christians are to imitate not only the positive saving work of God, his

367*AdDiog.* 10.5, tr. Lightfoot
368*AdDiog*. 10.6, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
369For example Irenaeus' notion that God became man so that Man can become god.
370*AdDiog.* 9.6, tr. Roberts-Donaldson

‘philantropy’[371], then the invisibility of God should mean that Christians are to eschew all positive definitions ‘as such’. No “human dogma (δόγματος ἀνθρωπίνου)”, “invention (ἐπινοίᾳ)”[372] etc. can capture the Christian mode of worship.[373] So it is arguably the case that imitation of God also implies the imitation of God’s negative (invisible) qualities. At least this would explain the behavior of Christians described in §5.

The dialectics in §9.6 is arguably reflected in the Christian imitation of God which is simultaneously invisible (in terms of the impossibility of capturing Christian worship) and visible (in terms of the relationality created by the imitation of God’s ‘philanthropy’). The Christian way of life is “is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts (παράδοξον) expectation.”[374] In other words, what we might call ‘visible invisibility’ and ‘invisible visibility’ is a central Christian virtue. Imitating God means being invisible while simultaneously doing “philanthropy (φιλανθρωπία)”.[375]

The possibility and character of ethical principles

The following discusses how radically we should understand the author's claim that Christians do not follow any particular ‘customs’ or ‘arrangements of life’, on the background of the above.[376] Where does this leave the possibility of formulating an ethics (with moral principles, guidelines or something similar), whether positive or negative? What is the fundamental structure of ethical principles if the above idea of Christian ethics and virtue as the imitation of God is taken for granted?

It is important to grasp how the imitation of God, and as such Christian ethics in general, relates to what we above have called the idea of ‘ambassadorship’, that Christians are in but not of the world. The positive ethics sketched above is not some sort of abstract ideal to be realized in Christian worship or modes of life (it is indicative rather than imperative). Rather Christians are first of all supposed simply to be present in the world, as the soul is present in the body.[377] When thus contextualized in a concrete relationship with the surrounding world, imitation of God will have consequences in actual practices.

We regularly find that the themes of the epistles are structured around a

371 *AdDiog.* 8.7; 9.2
372 Or 'conception'. This was the term so central for Gregory of Nyssa. Exactly because God is incomprehensible, we need to make up words. But Gregory is, of course, not talking about making up new dogmas. See below.
373 *AdDiog.* 5.3
374 *AdDiog.* 5.4, tr. Lightfoot
375 Philanthropy was also a central concept in Philo. See Heintz 2004
376 *AdDiog.* 5.1-5.2
377 *AdDiog.* 6.1-6.9

framework where negative theology and revelation are inseparable. This suggests that we should also introduce the consideration of ethics with an account of the epistle's negative claims about customs, moral norms, law, etc. as the natural or even necessary presupposition for considering the epistle's positive claims. The question is, is there such a thing as moral principles in Christian ethics, and if so what then is the relationship between negative and positive definitions?

First we will consider the author's claims about the "officiousness (πολυπραγμοσύνης)" of the Jews, their "inventions (ἐπινοίᾳ)", "impulses (ὁρμάς)" and "dogma (δόγματος)".[378] It should be noted that the term used for the 'officiousness' (πολυπραγμοσύνης) of the Jews, appears again in §5.3 as adjective (πολυπραγμόνων), translated as "ingenious" by Lightfoot and "inquisitive" by Roberts-Donaldson. Hence, the 'invention' (ἐπινοίᾳ, which Christians do not posses) might very well refer to Jewish rules. As such 'invention' would most probably be the product of the 'impulses' (ὁρμάς) that the author claims that the Jews are ruled by.[379] Whether 'dogma' (δόγματος) refers to Jewish beliefs is more questionable, since this term usually have either a more philosophical or political meaning (doctrine, ordinance, decree).[380] Being aware of the rhetorical and polemical context we should be cautious of interpreting such terms too technically. It is not impossible that by both 'invention' and 'dogma' is meant 'human wisdom' as such. On the other hand the context suggests a more practical or 'political' emphasis (as argued above). If 'invention' and 'dogma' has a broader meaning than Jewish beliefs in particular, at least the emphasis should be on specific (human) laws, rules or ethical principles, since the lack of such is posed as an explanation for why the Christians live after the same customs as others.

In §5.1-5.2 the author establishes a practical or customary similarity between the Christians and "the rest of mankind (τῶν λοιπῶν [...] ἀνθρώπων)"[381]. But what is meant by "customs (ἔσθεσι)" and what does it mean to "practice an extraordinary kind of life" (which the Christians do not)? Now, the word used for "practice (ἀσκοῦσιν)" literally means to practice in the sense of exercising, from which we have *asceticism*, or even to dress up or form something by art.[382] Now, if this means that Christians are not ascetic, this is of course important for ethics. Another term is "διαίτῃ"[383], from 'δίαιτα' which can be translated as dwelling,

378*AdDiog.* 4.6; 4.5
379*AdDiog.* 4.5
380LSJ, "δόγματος"
381*AdDiog.* 5.1
382LSJ, "ἀσκέω"
383*AdDiog.* 5.4

lifestyle, or simply *diet,* which seems to be the proper translation here, because of its connection with “ἐσθῆτι”, clothing or appearance. It seems that “ἐσθῆτι καὶ διαίτῃ” has a rather non-formal meaning. To be sure everything is included the author adds “τῷ λοιπῷ βίῳ”.

Now, is it possible to delineate a graded spectra of such practical terms, from the non-formal native customs, “τοῖς ἐγχωρίοις ἔθεσιν”, through the regulated, though not wholly formal, 'ἀσκοῦσιν' to the perhaps more formal 'νόμοις'? If so, we see that the author covers the whole spectrum of concepts referring to practice, leaving no room for “τὴν κατάστασιν τῆς ἑαυτῶν πολιτείας” in this spectra. In other words, the 'way of life' or 'constitution' of their own city is on a different plane than the customs of the world. Whether the variation of terms used is consciously aimed at making this obvious or not, at any rate the variety of terms ensures the ‘paradox’: Since there is no room for the Christian 'way of life' in the spectra, it can only be paradoxically present alongside the customs of the world.

Still, imitation of God, also in the positive sense, is central to the ethics of the epistle. If any ethical principles can be formulated at all the on basis of the above account, such should in some way reflect the described tensions, whether explicitly or implicitly. For example, it seems reasonable to formulate a positive principle that says that imitators of God ought to (or ‘does’, to stay in the indicative) give to those who are less well of. But even if this claim is really more indicative than imperative (imitation following spontaneously from the love of God, rather than being a matter of asceticism), this can never serve as a general, abstract criteria for recognizing Christians in the world. Such descriptions can only be given in the concrete so that we, in the case of the example, can talk about specific instances of giving or helping the needy. Only in particular narratives can positive ethical principles play a more substantial role. This follows from the notion that imitation of God in the positive is a relational, not an essential, thing (having to do with activities, not essence).

Nevertheless it seems obvious that it is at least possible to distinguish between different types of relating, based on §10.5-6. Any kind of relationship based on domination is ungodly, it seems.[384] Only by becoming a servant can one imitate God. But exactly by becoming a servant (as opposed to master) one also becomes ‘invisible’, just as the Logos went ‘undercover’ in the incarnation. Hence it is easier to say what an imitator of God does not look like in general, than saying something

384As such the gospel-accounts of ‘discipleship’ are not about imitating ‘the cross’ as a general ethical or existential category (for example self-denial in general). Imitating ‘the cross’ means relating to political power in a specific way. See Yoder 1994

about what such a person actually looks like. If someone executes power in a direct, violent way, this person is hardly an imitator of God. But one is not necessarily an imitator of God simply by not executing power or even being a servant. There is a problem of under-determination: Only if a person could have acted otherwise, as God could have executed his power differently, and only if this person acts out of the love for God that follows from faith and knowledge, is this person an imitator of God. But whether someone's actions or lack of actions is the result of this person being an imitator of God or not is uncertain.

As noted above the normatively negative properties that are described in §10.5, and which the Christians lack, can be summed up as power, wealth and violence. Concepts like these might be used in ethical principles to describe what imitation of God does not look like. But it seems that because of their relational significance, they only gain their full meaning from their propositional context (the principle and the context in which it is applied), rather than the other way around. Violence is not an abstract property of an action or the character of a person, that can be pointed out and then be described as ‘wrong’. Rather the meaning as well as the ‘wrongness’ of violence follows from the fact that it is an instance of a certain type of relationship. Only by seeing violence as opposite and incompatible with God’s self-sacrificial love in the history of the atonement can we grasp the full meaning of this phenomenon. Hence also negative ethical principles can only be understood as they relate to a larger narrative context (God’s plan of salvation).

The dialectics of this is that such negative ethical principles if understood properly automatically implies positive statements. That domination is wrong stems from the fact that God became a servant, and as such this negative fact is parasitical on a positive theological claim.

The paradoxical ‘ethics of invisibility’ brings us back to the theme of §5-6. As such §10.4 can be considered a central key to understanding the relationship of the polemical chapters (§2-§4) with the indicative chapters (§5-§6).

The Christians and the World

We now have some notion of the fundamental idea of what characterizes the Christians according to the epistle. This idea can be applied when we study the author's descriptions of the Christians in the world.

In, but not of, the world

The polemical chapters dealt with above are in a way mostly preliminary

introductory remarks, meant to clear the possible prejudices held by the recipient.[385] In §5-6 we get to what §1.1 seems to suggest would be a positive exposition of Christian religion. But after the remark in §4.6 we should expect an account with a more indirect, negative character. Fundamentally these chapters of the epistle deals with a tension or paradox between visibility and invisibility: Central is the claim that "Christians are recognised as being in the world, and yet their religion remaineth invisible."[386]

The '*apophatic* structure' formed by the remarks in §1.1 and §4.6 is in §5-§6 filled out by the notion that Christians are in some way 'resident aliens', "sojourners (πάροικοι)"[387] living in a foreign country. This idea that Christians live as strangers in the world is not unique to *The Epistle to Diognetus*. The notion is traditionally expressed in the popular dictum that Christians are 'in but not of the world', a paraphrase of such New Testament passages as Jn 17:15-16, Jn 18:36. This 'dictum' is also (almost) expressly confirmed by the author when he notes that "Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world (Χριστιανοὶ ἐν κόσμῳ οἰκοῦσιν, οὐκ εἰσὶ δὲ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου)"[388].

Christians are like sojourners in a foreign country. But the reason that it is not possible to be instructed in the Christian religion by any man is,[389] that Christians live in accordance with the "customs (ἔσθεσι)"[390] of the world: "For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs."[391] Christians do not dwell in their own cities (a hint of political *lingua*). Nor do they use a particular language, and they do not "practise an extraordinary kind of life (βίον παράσημον ἀσκοῦσιν)"[392].

The claims in §5.1-§5.2 follow immediately after the remark in §4.6, and as such come to serve as the 'explanans' for which §4.6 is the 'explanandum' (that it is not possible to be instructed by any man about the Christian religion). The author's description in §5.3 seems to serve as further explanation for the Christians' customary similarity with the world. Here the author notes that Christians do not possess "any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men (ἐπινοίᾳ τινὶ καὶ φροντίδι πολυπραγμόνων ἀνθρώπων)", nor are Christians "masters of any human dogma (δόγματος ἀνθρωπίνου προεστᾶσιν)".[393] There is an

385*AdDiog.* 2.1
386*AdDiog.* 6.4, tr. Lightfoot
387*AdDiog.* 5.5, tr. Lightfoot
388*AdDiog.* 6.3, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
389*AdDiog.* 4.6
390*AdDiog.* 5.1, Lightfoot
391*AdDiog.* 5.1, Lightfoot
392*AdDiog.* 5.2, tr. Lightfoot
393*AdDiog.* 5.3, tr. Lightfoot

obvious similarity with this claim and the polemics against the Jews, which might prove relevant for the possibility of ethics as such on the grounds of the authors epistemology. The invisibility of the Christians is explained by the lack of 'dogmas' and 'inventions'. What is crucial is of course what creates this lack. As argued above this stems from the fact that Christians imitate the invisibility of God.

A ‘political’ paradox?

There is more to say about the epistle's use of 'political' metaphors. Hence we will return to §5.4 and §5.9, the latter in which the author notes that the Christians “pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven (ἐν οὐρανῷ πολιτεύονται)”[394]. But as suggested, already the claim that Christians do not dwell in their own cities has a political significance (though the claim is without a direct reference to their ‘heavenly citizenship’). This significance becomes clear as it is further developed in §5.4. Here the author has the following important observation about the Christians:

> “But while they dwell (Κατοικοῦντες) in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship (τὴν κατάστασιν τῆς ἑαυτῶν πολιτείας), which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts (παράδοξον) expectation.”[395]

As in §5.1 we see a reference to “customs (ἔθεσιν)”. But in §5.4 the author adds “and the other arrangements of life (τῷ λοιπῷ βίῳ)”, which seems to cover pretty much everything else that has to do with lifestyle, or 'bodily' or 'practical' life (βίῳ). Against this is posed “the constitution of their own citizenship (τὴν κατάστασιν τῆς ἑαυτῶν πολιτείας)”. Allusions to heavenly citizenship like this inserts a political imagery into the ‘in but not of the world’-structure, and reflect such NT passages as Phil. 3:20 (“our citizenship is in heaven”[396]). But what is exactly meant by ‘κατάστασιν’, translated by Lightfoot as “constitution”, and ‘πολιτείας’, translated as “citizenship” (though both terms can actually be translated as ‘constitution’)? Roberts-Donaldson translates ‘τὴν κατάστασιν τῆς ἑαυτῶν πολιτείας’ as “their [...] method of life”, which, however, is close to swallowing up any political significance. On the other hand ‘πολιτείας’ does have a broader meaning than simply ‘citizenship’ in the political sense, in that it can also mean the concrete collection of citizens, as well as the daily life of the citizen.[397]

394*AdDiog.* 5.9, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
395*AdDiog.* 5.4, tr. Lightfoot
396Phil. 3:20, NIV
397LSJ, “πολιτεία”. The LSJ refers to Arist. Pol. 1292a34.

Also ‘κατάστασιν’ tends to have a slightly more concrete meaning than ‘constitution’ (in the judicial-political sense) in some contexts, meaning ‘condition’, ‘settlement’, ‘position’ (military) etc.[398]

This “constitution of their [...] citizenship” is contrary to expectation, a paradox (παράδοξον), though of course not in the common modern sense of a logical self-contradiction or absurdity. Rather 'paradox' here means something that is besides what is apparent. But not only is the Christian religion (if we can equate this with the “constitution of their [...] citizenship”) contrary to expectation, it is also “marvellous (θαυμαστὴν)”. Hence it seems that the Christian religion is not altogether invisible. This is also suggested by the fact that A describes it as something that the Christians “set forth” (ἐνδείκνυνται), or ‘exhibits’, ‘displays’, ‘declares’, ‘proves’. Again, this makes it reasonable to think of 'the paradox of the Christian religion' (as we might call it) in terms of invisibility and visibility.

In §5.5 we get the impression that the 'paradox' discussed above consists in the fact that Christians simultaneously live as ordinary citizens as well as if they were strangers.

> “They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign.”[399]

Hence Christianity is hardly thought of here as just a 'parallel culture', but rather as a specific attitude towards the dominant culture. This attitude is characterized by a certain detachment, made possible through the adherence to a different 'constitution'.

In §5.10 the author notes that the Christians surpass (νικῶσι) the laws (νόμοις). This seems to contradict the claim that Christians do not practice (or ‘exercise’) any extraordinary kind of life. Hence what this ‘surpassing’ consists in, in political or judicial terms, is not completely clear. This partly has to do with the fact that it is not clear either what the author means by law, and what the purpose of the worldly law is (whether actual or ideal). But the author does give us a range of examples of how the life of Christians “contradicts expectation”. Especially from §5.11-§5.17 (following the claim about the surpassing of the laws) these examples exhibit a ‘paradoxical’ character, generally by exposing an asymmetry between the Christians’ approach to the world and the world’s response, and *vice versa*, e.g.:

398LSJ, ”κατάστασις”
399*AdDiog.* 5.5

“They are ignored, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and yet they are endued with life.”[400] The ‘law’ and the Christians’ relationship to this does not seem play any role in these examples, however.

Though political *lingua* has a central role, especially in §5, it might seem that the point of the author is not ‘political’ (judicial or constitutional) as such. Still, it is obvious that the epistle points out a paradoxical or asymmetrical tension between the Christian religion and the ‘laws’ and ‘customs’ of the world. It is paradoxical since Christians are invisibly present in the world. This tension has a ‘political’ significance (though it might not as such be ‘political’ in the sense of having to do with political philosophy or a certain political project), which is also present when the author applies the soul-body analogy in §6. We will now move on to discuss this analogy.

The context of the Christians’ presence in the world is the city. This means that imitation of the incarnate logos has a certain ‘political’ meaning. The city (as a broad concept) is where the powers of the world converge. Whether or not the constitution or laws of the city is the result of such power, or such power is possible because of the formal structures present in the city is a matter of secondary importance (for this study anyway). What is important is that the Church is specifically present here rather than elsewhere, for example in the desert as some groups of Christians did in the centuries that followed. Not that Christians cannot live in the desert, but such desert-dwelling would be relatively unimportant compared to the Church’s task in the city. Christians are to imitate God’s self-sacrificial love where it most clearly contradicts the norm. Not by a moralistic or political attempt to change to norms of power, and the rules and laws of the world, but Christians are to “surpass the laws in their own lives”[401]. It is as such that the life form of the Christians can be truly described as “paradoxical”[402].

The soul-body analogy and ecclesiology

The use of political *lingua* and imagery might be more an allegory than an actual depiction of the Christians’ relation to the world. This seems to be the case when the author in §6.1-§6.9 goes on to use the relationship of the soul to the body as analogy: “In a word, what the soul is in a body, this the Christians are in the world.”[403]

There are of course rhetorical purposes for the invocation of the soul-body

400*AdDiog.* 5.12, tr. Lightfoot
401*AdDiog.* 5.10, tr. Lightfoot
402*AdDiog.* 5.4
403*AdDiog.* 6.1, tr. Lightfoot

relationship (rather than other analogies). Speaking of the Christians in the world as the soul in the body would immediately invoke connotations in the audience, who would typically share some basic notions of the soul as the invisible essence or life of the body. Hence we should not necessarily expect to find any coherent 'anthropology' (to use a modern term), or a 'metaphysical theory' of the soul or the body, simply because these terms are used. There are, however, some rather explicit presuppositions about the soul present in §6. For understanding the analogy fully, it is helpful to get a precise overview of these. Moreover, these presuppositions might also prove to affect the way the author construes the notion of "happiness (εὐδαιμονεῖν)" as consisting in the imitation of God.[404]

So what does the author say about the soul and the body? The soul is "spread" (Lightfoot) or "dispersed" (Roberts-Donaldson) "through all the members of the body" (Lightfoot); the soul "dwells in the body, yet is not of the body" (Roberts-Donaldson); the soul is invisible, but guarded in the body which is visible; the soul is enclosed in the body, but holds the body together; the soul is immortal, while the body is mortal .[405] The term used for "spread" is 'ἔσπαρται', which can also mean 'sown' or even 'begotten'.[406] Interpreted as 'sown' this allows for the idea that the Christians have been placed in the various cities of the world, though in a rather non-systematic manner, which also fits with §5.4's "as the lot of each is cast".[407]

In §6.7 the author most importantly notes that as the soul "holdeth the body together", so the Christians "hold the world together"[408]. From §6.8 we get the impression that this is due to the fact that while the body is mortal, the immortal soul can in some way communicate its life to the body. The author does not say this explicitly, though, but since this was a common view of the soul's role, the notion is arguably implied to some degree in §6.7-§6.8.

The claim that Christians in some way preserve the world can from a modern perspective easily sound like what might be termed 'conservative'. Even if such terminology is anachronistic, there might had been some plausibility to such a characteristic if the claim was made in a post-Constantinian context (as Overbeck would have it). But since the epistle was probably written in a period where Christians were hardly likely to identify themselves as the protector of the political

404*AdDiog.* 10
405*AdDiog.* 6.2; 6.4; 6.7; 6.8
406LSJ, "σπείρω"
407*AdDiog.* 5.4, tr. Lightfoot. That the cities of the world are like the members of the body easily yields the impression of the world as one organism. According to the logic of such NT-passages as Rev. 13; 1 John 4:3, 'Antichrist' (or similar agents) would be the head of this body. But the author keeps the descriptions of the customs of the world in a neutral language (maybe due to the allegedly Pagan audience).
408*AdDiog.* 6.7, tr. Lightfoot

status quo, the ‘conservative’ political interpretation is unwarranted. A more ontological and paradox-driven understanding seems more plausible: The Christians hold the world together *despite* of the conflicting political and spiritual forces that is on the verve of tearing the world (and the Christians) apart. They do so by simply by being present in every city of the world.

That the application of the soul-body analogy in §6 comes after the political imagery in §5 does not mean that a ‘metaphysical’ understanding is closer to reality than a ‘political’ one, but rather that reality can only be described in such and similar analogies. If anything, the opposite is the case since §6.1 clearly suggests that the soul-body analogy is applied to make the political situation of the Christians clear. The final remark in §6.10 also points in this direction: “God has assigned them this illustrious position (τάξιν), which it were unlawful (οὐ θεμιτὸν) for them to forsake.”[409] The “position” mentioned could very well refer to the fact that the Christians, as the soul in the members of the body, are “spread” through the cities of the world (6.2). Hence the claims made during the use of the soul-body analogy in §6 is finally tied up again to the political imagery in §5. By doing this the author answers Diognetus’ question of how (in what way) the Christians worship God (πῶς θρησκεύοντες αὐτὸν).[410]

Finally it should be remarked that the theme of the invisibility of the Christians in the world is of course continuously present through the use of the soul-body analogy, most explicitly in §6.4. In §6 the emphasis is, however, not so much on the paradoxical character of the Christian religion, as it is on the asymmetry (also noted above) between the Christian’s attitude towards the world and *vice versa*, e.g.: “The soul loveth the flesh which hateth it, and the members: so Christians love those that hate them.”[411] It seems plausible, however, that 'love' and 'hate' in this context should not be understood merely as attitudes or sentiments, but also as activities.

Finally we should ask how an ecclesiology is possible given the above? How is the Christian community related to itself? The above implies that the author's use of the soul-body analogy means that the term ‘Christians’ must refer to the unity of believers rather than simply the collection of individual Christians. As such §5-§6 arguably implies some sort of ecclesiology. The soul-body analogy suggests a collective understanding of the Christians in such a way that the plural term ‘Christians’ is not just a reference to the sum total of individual believers. This is

409*AdDiog*. 6.10, tr. Roberts-Donaldson
410*AdDiog.* 1.1
411*AdDiog.* 6.6, tr. Lightfoot

hardly controversial in a pre-modern context, but it should be noticed anyway, at least in order to ward of modern ‘existentialistic’ interpretations or similar anachronisms inclined to an individualistic notion of faith. One obvious reason that the soul-body analogy goes against such readings is that the plural of the ‘Christians’ is analogized with the singular of ‘the soul’. Most recipients (Diognetus), despite of their specific philosophical affiliations, would probably have held to a notion of the soul as the essence of the body in a way that implies its unity (even if one held to a view of the soul as composite). There is, on the other hand, no hints of a hierarchical or corporative idea of the Church. Different ideas of functions in the soul could have been utilized for such purposes, but the author primarily uses the soul as a metaphor for invisibility. Hence this does not leave much room for distinctions in the descriptions of the Christians (maybe a perspective from the 'inside' would look different). But also, the author's emphasis that Christians does not pursue power might be a sign that a too hierarchical ecclesiology is foreign to the author.

Conclusion

The point of the above have been to show how the Judeo-Christian distinction between Creator and creation structures the arguments of *The Epistle to Diognetus.* This distinction means that there can be no knowledge about God unless he reveals himself. God is essentially ineffable, but comprehensible in his activities. Since imitation of God is a central ethical concern in the epistle, we expected to see this to affect the author's claims about Christian conduct.

It has been argued that the imitation of God for the author is simultaneously imitation of the invisibility of God and of God as he reveals himself in the concrete history of salvation. Invisibility has for the author a general epistemological meaning. That God is invisible means that he is completely inaccessible to philosophy.

Invisibility is to be understood in a radical sense. This is why Christians are somewhat paradoxically on the hand invisibly present in the world, following the customs of whatever city they live in, while they on the other hand do not pursue power and wealth. Rather Christians, while staying invisible, exercise philanthropy, love for neighbor, by giving to those in need. Philanthropy is relational, not essential. Love is not an abstract property of neither God nor the Christians, but something that God and his imitators, the Christians, do in the world. Because of its concrete character positive Christian ethics can only be unfolded in a particular historical context. As such what makes ethical principles possible is the actual

setting of the Christian life. The imitation of the incarnate logos always implies the tension of ‘not being of the world’ and thus being invisible and removed (even in a sense abstracted) from the world, and at the same time ‘being in the world’ which is something visible and relative (and thus concrete). Precisely because of its concrete character, the latter aspect is not some general characteristic of the Christians, but must unfold in a specific context.

Imitation of God does not mean imitation in the abstract, but of the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ. As God’s philanthropy and goodness are only revealed in His concrete relationship with humankind as he displays his plan of salvation, Christian ‘virtues’ are not intrinsic (unrelated) properties of the human person as much as they are descriptive of the Church’s (the Christians’) relation to itself and the world. On the one hand Christian ethics are thus concrete, but on the other hand this does not mean that imitation of God as the incarnate Logos is a one-to-one reflection of the life of Jesus. Christians are not to stay celibate or be carpenters, as Jesus, but to imitate the dialectics exhibited in God’s plan of salvation.

The themes of custom and law are for the author bound up with a concrete relationship with the city (used as a broad, generic term). The epistle repeatedly refers to ‘constitution(s)’. The city and its constitution is the locus for the regularities of the world, and the concrete context of the Christians’ relation to the world. The city is where the Christian community is simultaneously invisible and visible. Hence Christian ethics need always be unfolded on the background of a certain historical and political narrative.

Part III. Clement of Alexandria

> *"[I]n the case of people who are setting out on a road with which they are unacquainted, it is sufficient merely to point out the direction. After this they must walk and find out the rest for themselves."* (Clement, *Stromata* 4.2.4.4)

Introduction

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) was most likely the head of the catechetical school of Alexandria.[412] Alexandria was a melting pot for Hellenic culture and Jewish mysticism. Clement lived in a time where persecutions of Christians were still common, and where clashes with strains of Gnosticism shaped Christian thought. Clement might have been active in Caesarea in Cappadocia as well.

Clement is a good example of when Christian theology started to take over the Platonic and similar 'philosophical' ideals of knowledge, ideals where such things as virtue and ethical perfection are closely related to intellectual knowledge. In *The Instructor* Clement promised a coming work in systematic theology. Such a work never came, but the *Stromata* is the likely substitute. Far from being a systematic work of philosophy and theology, however, the *Stromata* is an eclectic mixture of philosophical and theological remarks and reflections. As such Clement falls into the same category as Philo of whom Dodds said that "his eclecticism is that of the jackdaw rather than the philosopher"[413]. Clement explains that this is fully intentional. And as we will argue, his way of writing in the *Stromata* reflects a deeper connection between negative theology and moral philosophy, namely the fact that theology (and theological ethics) for the true 'Gnostic' must always be what we have called a *theologia viatorum,* a theology that can be true, though a final, adequate system is not attainable.

Because of the radical distinction between Creator and creation there can be no 'positive' participation in the divine being. Imitation of God as a way of being means being simple, as God is simple. This means being abstracted from all other things. Imitation of God, as a matter of being in a certain state, is a negative state of affairs. This does not mean that no positive form of participation or imitation is possible. In acting and becoming (as distinguished from being) it is possible for the abstracted and thus simple Gnostic to participate in or to imitate the works of God. The Gnostic is a "living image of the Lord", a symbol of God's power in deed and

412Osborn 2008, p. 19
413Dodds 1928, pp. 129-42

preaching. This is always a matter of concrete action. For moral epistemology this means that only a negative or abstractive ethics is possible generally, while a positive, directly descriptive ethics is only possible in the concrete, particular.

Clement is often thought of as the first Christian author to systematically use negative theology,[414] though there are instances of proto-negative theology in the New Testament, while Justin Martyr and others use language similar to Philo's. Moreover, a broadly pragmatic kind of negative theology is also present in the apostolic and apologetic fathers, albeit in a more polemical form.[415] In Clement a broader and deeper form of negative theology seem to blend in his philosophical endeavors. Clement's negative theology leads him to a somewhat 'esoteric' view on language, where symbolism and enigma plays a large role. This is where things start becoming complicated, but also interesting for moral epistemology.

Franz Overbeck considered Clement of Alexandria's thinking a crucial point in the development of Patristic philosophy. With him it had arrived at the essential conditions for its further unfolding.[416] Salvadora Lilla has pointed out that Clement's "system" represents the "meeting-point of three distinct streams", namely Jewish-Alexandrine philosophy (Philo), (Neo-)Platonism and Gnosticism.[417] As Adolf Harnack before him Lilla represents the idea that Clement's philosophy is in a sense a "philosophical system". Runia, Osborn, and others have criticized this idea, an idea which also seems to contradict Clement's own description of his method in the *Stromata*.[418] Choufrine criticizes Lilla for not putting enough emphasis on Clement's ideal of deification. According to Choufrine, Clement could not have arrived at this ideal through the Platonic idea of "assimilation to God as far as possible"[419]. This idea was rather derived from Irenaues or similar. Clement, Choufrine adds, did not only see Jesus as an example to be followed, but as the ontological ground for the possibility for human beings of participating in the divine.[420]

While not opposed to, e.g., Choufrine's emphasis on deification, the following is more in line with the approach found in Raoul Mortley's work on the development on negative theology. While it is certainly true that deification (in some sense) is a leading motif in Clement, it should be understood on the background of his theory of concealment and his negative theology. This relativizes the idea of deification in

414See Mortley 1986; Hägg 2006
415See our discussion above.
416Overbeck 1882, p. 70
417See Lilla 1971
418Runia 1993, p. 153
419Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b
420Choufrine 2002, p. 7

a crucial way, as we will see. The following will summarize Clement's points in a somewhat orderly manner (Clement's intentionally fragmented style makes such order hard to attain, though, if possible at all). It will not be a general resumé of his works, but a discussion of his statements as far as they can be made relevant for the link between his negative theology and ethics. Such a link is problematic enough to establish in any systematical way. Only in the last chapters will we take up the discussions hinted at here, not least Choufrine's discussion of Clement's notion of deification.

In his negative theology there is particularly two important elements, namely 1) the notion of God as the first principle (ontologically and epistemologically), 2) the notion of God's simplicity. There is particularly four elements in Clement's epistemology (and its ontological grounds) that we shall focus on, namely 1) abstraction as a way of approaching negative theology, 2) the relationship between dialectic and revelation, and 3) the role of the Logos, 4) faith and anticipation (*prolepsis*). All these seem to play specific roles in Clement's thinking. Though the purpose of the present study is to describe the connections between his negative theology and his ethics (moral epistemology), these elements should be noticed. Our central claim is that imitation of God for Clement can never in any positive sense be a matter of 'being', since the Judeo-Christian distinction bars any similarity of Creator and creation. Imitation, however, can take place in anticipation and as a matter of becoming, where a positive imitation of the works of Jesus Christ is possible, as concrete action.

Clement's approach to philosophy and Pagan culture

The eclecticism of Clement has earned him the reputation of an ambitious, but unfocused thinker. But as Hägg has argued:

> "The so-called inconsistencies in Clement are, no doubt, intended. His reflections on language and its inadequacy and his use of symbols and enigmas as alternative ways to represent ultimate reality are the result of a conscious choice. Far from cultivating paradox 'for the sake of paradox', Clement turned to the use of paradox as a last resort."[421]

When Clement weaves together highly different topics from Pagan philosophy and culture we should be careful not to discard this as mere syncretism. There is, it turns out, particular theological reasons for his style. Also we should not forget that much of Clement's thinking is developed in opposition to strands of gnosticism

421Hägg 2006, p. 29

(Valentinus and Basilides). Hence we should not expect to find a too coherent system in Clement. Moreover, understanding his eclecticism, might prove to be if not the only way into his thinking, then at least a fruitful approach.

Clement's eclecticism

For Clement eclecticism is made possible by the fact that “the Greeks” knew God, “[...]not by positive knowledge, but by indirect expression (κατὰ περίφρασιν)”[422]. This we might call indirect or ‘periphrastic’ theology.[423] The Christian scriptures are not the only way to knowledge about God. This idea often blurs the fact that Clement’s theology should be described as a ‘revelation theology’. As Choufrine notes, while for Irenaues the incarnation did not first of all have a revelatory function, this is the case in Clement as it is in Paul.[424] We can only know something about God if it is revealed to us.

However, philosophy was not discovered by the Greeks through “human understanding (σύνεσιν ἀνθρώπων)”[425], but “[...]understanding is sent by God (τὴν σύνεσιν θεόπεμπτον εἶναι).”[426] Hence Greek philosophy can reflect the truth, at least partly, or it has, as Clement poetically expresses it, “a dream of the truth”[427]. Large portions of Hellenic philosophy were given by the Christian God. By an order of angels it were distributed among the nations.[428] But the knowledge of divine things takes form after national and ethnic peculiarities: “God was known by the Greeks in a Gentile way, by the Jews Judaically, and in a new and spiritual way by us (ἡμῶν καὶ πνευματικῶς γινωσκόμενον).”[429]

With allusion to Philo, Clement defines philosophy as the study of wisdom, and wisdom as the knowledge of things divine and human, and their causes.[430] Clement is a true eclectic: Whatever has been well said by the sects of philosophy, “which teach righteousness along with a science pervaded by piety, - this eclectic whole (σύμπαν τὸ ἐκλεκτικὸν) I call philosophy.”[431] Hence Clement also denounces those who claim that philosophy “was set a-going by the devil (ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου τὴν κίνησιν).”[432] But even if it “came stolen, or given by a thief”, this does not make it

422*Str.* 6.5.39.1, p. 489
423Assuming that all negative theology is in some sense indirect, this must be an even broader category.
424Choufrine 2002, p. 200
425*Str.* 6.8.62.4, p. 206
426*Str.* 6.8.63.1, p. 494
427*Protr.* 5, p. 190
428*Str.* 7.2
429*Str.* 6.5.41, p. 489
430*Str.* 1.1, p. 306. Philo, *De Congressu Eruditionis*
431*Str.* 1.7.37, p. 308. Clement’s conception of ‘righteousness’ will be discussed below.
432*Str.* 1.16.80, p. 318

less useful.[433] Among the philosophers it is, not surprisingly, especially (but far from exclusively) Plato whom Clement refers to.

Because of his similarities with Albinus (e.g. his use of the term ἀφαίρεσις) Clement is often grouped among the Middle-Platonists.[434] His approach to and use of Plato (Platonic logic and ontology, ethics etc.) alone gives some credential to such categorization. Clement refers to Plato as the "truth-loving (φιλαλήθης)"[435], and in his *Exhortation to the Heathen* Clement writes that:

> "I seek after God, not the works of God (θεὸν ἐπιζητῶ, οὐ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ). Whom shall I take as a helper in my inquiry? We do not, if you have no objection, wholly disown Plato. How, then, is God to be searched out, O Plato?" [436]

Clement then quotes *Timaeus* 28c, in which Plato notes that "[...]it is impossible to declare Him to all. For this is by no means capable of expression, like the other subjects of instruction".[437] Clement praises Plato for being aware that God is (more or less) unknowable. Hence this is an example that his use of Hellenic philosophy turns out to have a negative function, and that this thinking is reworked into a framework that is somewhat different from the Platonic (where God is not primarily unknowable). Another example is when Antisthenes is quoted approvingly for saying that "God is not like to any (θεὸν οὐδενὶ ἐοικέναι)", and Xenophon for saying that "what He is in form is not revealed (ὁποῖος δέ τις μορφήν, ἀφανής)."[438]

Though Clement seems to be saying that the Greeks had a positive, though fragmented, 'insight' into the mysteries of God, it soon turns out that in Clement's use, Greek philosophy has a primarily negative (or indirect, 'periphrastic') function. For example his famous claim, that one should at least do philosophy in order to know why not to do it: "[...]even if philosophy were useless, if the demonstration (βεβαίωσις) of its uselessness does good, it is yet useful."[439] Also, we cannot condemn opinions that we do not understand.[440]

A similar thing is true in practical contexts. Especially the comic writers' attacks on traditional religion is useful for Clement. In his *Exhortation to the Heathen* Clement exclaims: "Let the strictures on your gods, which the poets, impelled by

433*Str.* 1.17.81, p. 319
434Mortley 1986, p. 8
435*Str.* 5.12.78.1, p. 175
436*Protr.* 6.67.2, p. 191
437Plato, *Tim* 28c
438*Protr.* 6.71, p. 192
439*Str.* 1.2.19, p. 303
440*Str.* I.I, p. 303

the force of truth, introduce in their comedies, shame you into salvation."[441] He then goes on to quote Menander, Antisthenes, Homer, Euripides and others. Throughout the *Stromata*, Clement's use of Pagan philosophy and culture becomes of a still more critical kind. Where he had praised philosophy to start with, he ends up using poetry. Also, it turns out that often Clement believes, that the more obscure and enigmatic Pagan philosophy is, the better. There is a range of theological and epistemological reasons for this that we shall look into later.

What is truth, wisdom, knowledge?

Despite of his own acknowledgment of the lack of system in the *Stromata,* Clement describes his subject as "skilfully ordered Wisdom (ὀρθῶς σοφίαν τεχνικήν)"[442] in contradistinction to the sects of philosophy. So Clement is not, in the *Stromata*, saying that wisdom is not a coherent system. Wisdom is a "certain knowledge (ἔμπεδον γνῶσιν), sure and irrefragable apprehension of things divine and human, comprehending the present, past, and future[...]"[443]. But the presentation of wisdom must be done in a fragmented way, it seems. There are aspects of Wisdom:

> "[...]in one aspect it is eternal (αἰώνιός), and in another it becomes useful in time (δὲ χρόνῳ λυσιτελής). Partly it is one and the same, partly many and indifferent – partly without any movement of passion, partly with passionate desire – partly perfect, partly incomplete (ἢ μὲν τέλειος, ἢ δὲ ἐνδεής)."[444]

The 'μὲν … δὲ' construction allows us to entertain the idea that wisdom is on the one hand perfect, and on the other imperfect. In one sense it can be fully so simultaneously (not just partly the one, and partly the other).

As Christ is from the perspective of the Father perfect unity, from our perspective He can only be grasped through parables, enigmas and symbols, etc. (concealment).

Clement's own explanation for the fragmented style of the *Stromata* is that the mysteries should be delivered mystically. That which is spoken is not in the voice of the speaker, but in his understanding.[445] The point seems to be that speaking and writing, at least in the style that Clement has chosen, only indirectly reveals the truth. The form of the *Stromata* are in Clement's own words "promiscously

441 *Protr.* 7.75.1, p. 193
442 *Str.* 6.7.54.1, p. 493, modified. "ὀρθῶς … τεχνικήν" should not be "strictly systematic", but "skilfully ordered". This is a good example that Palmer's criticism is legitimate (as mentioned above). See Palmer 1983, p. 236
443 *Str.* 6.7.54.1
444 *Str.* 6.7.54.3, p. 493
445 *Str.* 1.1, p. 302

(ἀναμίξ) variegated (ποίκιλται) like a meadow (λειμῶνος)”[446].

The *Stromata* are notes meant to serve “kindling sparks (ζώπυρα)”[447]. This is why Clement says that:

> “The *Stromata* will contain the truth mixed up in the dogmas of philosophy (ἀναμεμιγμένην τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῖς φιλοσοφίας δόγμασι), or rather covered over and hidden (ἐγκεκαλυμμένην καὶ ἐπικεκρυμμένην), as the edible part of the nut in the shell.”[448]

The question is if such ‘esotericism’ or ‘mysticism’ was Clement’s intentional purpose to start with? Or is it just an explanation made up *ad hoc,* designed to excuse that it was not possible for Clement to work out the systematic philosophy he had promised? Is Clement himself a half-way ‘Gnostic’ who is only in a process of gaining knowledge, a knowledge that is by nature enigmatic and fragmented?

Even if it were possible to formulate a coherent theological system, Clement repeatedly insists that it is Christ himself that is the truth: “Our knowledge, and our spiritual garden, is the Saviour Himself”[449]. Hence Clement notes that “[...]a considerable number of people occupy themselves with the truth, or rather with discourse concerning the truth (τὸν περὶ ἀληθείας λόγον)”[450]. This seems to imply that the latter is not identical to the former. It would probably be too radical to interpret this as excluding discursive thinking. But it is at least obvious that truth, for Clement, is not so much a feature of our beliefs about the world, but something external to our beliefs, doctrines, as well as parables and symbols. On the other hand (supposing that ‘truth’ and ‘wisdom’ are at least parallel matters), it is precisely because “Christ Himself is Wisdom (αὐτόν τε τὸν Χριστὸν σοφίαν)”, that the *gnosis* “imparted and revealed by the Son of God, is wisdom.”[451]

What is crucial is, that the truth, wisdom, etc. of our theological system is always derived from its object, God or Christ himself, by which it is revealed.

> “One speaks in one way of the truth, in another way the truth interprets itself (ἄλλως τις περὶ ἀληθείας λέγει, ἄλλως ἡ ἀλήθεια ἑαυτὴν ἑρμηνεύει). The guessing at truth is one thing, and truth itself is another. Resemblance is one thing, the thing itself is another. And the one results from learning and practice, the other from power and faith. For the teaching of piety is a gift, but faith is grace.”[452]

446*Str.* 6.1.2.3
447*Str.* 6.1.2.2, p. 480
448*Str.* 1.1.18.1, p. 303
449*Str.* 6.1.2.4, p. 480
450*Str.* 6.17.149.3, p. 515
451*Str.* 6.7.61.1
452*Str.* 1.7.38.4

Theological speculation according to Clement can arguably not be adequate in the sense we have defined adequacy, though it can be true, or at least stand in a relation to truth.

The righteousness of the heathen

We need to do philosophy in order to know if it is useless or not.[453] While this is of course a reasonable claim to intellectual 'fairness' there also seems to be more going on. Philosophy has a purificative function as well.[454] As such Philosophy also has a deeper ethical function: "[...]the Greek philosophy, as it were, purges the soul, and prepares it beforehand for the reception of faith, on which the Truth builds up the edifice of knowledge."[455] Hence philosophy has for the Greeks the same function as the Old Testament and the Mosaic Law had for Israel, though at times it seems that it is just as much the other way round, as when Clement understands the Sabbath as symbol for self-control.[456] At any rate, philosophy was "a schoolmaster (ἐπαιδαγώγει)"[457] to bring "the Hellenic mind" to Christ. Hence in a famous and controversial passage, Clement states, that "before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness"[458]. Now we must be careful about how we understand 'righteousness' (δικαιοσύνη) when judging such claims. Clement does not hold the concepts of law and righteousness that is implied in later more judicial theologies.[459] Righteousness, for Clement, often seems simply to mean virtue.

Clement adds that there are "several ways of salvation (πλείονας σωτηρίους)"[460]. But this is not equivalent to anything akin to modern religious pluralism, of course. Clement is not saying that Christ is just one of many ways to God (neither epistemologically or soteriologically). As noted above, "the true philosophy (φιλοσοφίας ἀληθοῦς)" is not something which the human mind discovers on its own, but rather something which it receives "from the truth itself (αὐτῆς τῆς ἀληθείας)."[461] If philosophy can do anything on its own, without revelation, it would be because secular philosophy can work as "preparatory (προπαιδείαν)" training for receiving this truth.[462] The "several ways of salvation" are not positive

453*Str.* 1.2.19
454Much similar to Plato, *Phaedo* 69b-69c
455*Str.* 7.3.20.2, p. 241
456*Str.* 4.3.8.6, p. 116
457*Str.* 1.5.28.3
458*Str.* 1.5.28.1, p. 305
459E.g. Anselm's theory of atonement (*Cur Deus Homo?*), or later magisterial Protestantism.
460*Str.* 1.5.29.3, p. 305
461*Str.* 1.5.32.4, p. 307
462*Str.* 1.5.32.4

and ‘continuous’. Rather, they are negative, 'discontinuous' ways, means of purification that makes the addition of revelation possible.

In the first book of the *Stromata* Clement notes that “[r]ighteousness [...] is not constituted without discourse (ἡ δικαιοσύνη γοῦν οὐ χωρὶς λόγου συνίσταται)”[463]. What does he mean by this? Clement continues: “[...]as the receiving of good is abolished if we abolish the doing of good; so obedience and faith are abolished when neither the command, nor one to expound the command, is taken along with us.”[464] Hence by discourse he seems to mean “the command”, which goes before obedience. So in this passage righteousness is defined as obedience (rather than virtue as suggested above). So when he argues that Greek philosophy was necessary for righteousness, he seems to be saying that it was necessary for obedience. Again, this fits well with his claim that philosophy “purges the soul” and prepares “the reception of faith”. And “faith is the ear of the soul (πίστις δὲ ὦτα ψυχῆς)”[465]. Righteousness is obedience, and obedience is the reception of faith.

The problem with “those who believe not, as to be expected” is that they “drag all down from heaven, and the region of the invisible, to earth”.[466] This is what happens when the mind is not purified by philosophy. What the Pagans can and should know outside the actual positive knowledge of God given in revelation, is that nothing in this world is God, to put it sharply.

As will become clear later, for Clement philosophy (Hellenic), but also Egyptian mysteries, the Hebrew scriptures and so on, is like a veil that simultaneously presents and conceals the truth. This links Clement’s discussion of Hellenic philosophy to his negative theology. But for now it is enough to be aware of the purificative function of philosophy.

Clement’s somewhat positive approach to Hellenic culture and philosophy might give rise to the question, of whether his teachings imply a form of synergism (cooperation of human and divine powers in salvation) or (semi-)Pelagianism (to use a later term). Clement says at one instance that “[...]since what the commandments enjoin are in our own power, along with the performance of them (σὺν δὲ τῷ ποιεῖν), the promise is accomplished.”[467]

Do human beings cooperate with God in salvation (e.g. by being prepared through philosophy), or is salvation the work of God only (for example through the

463*Str.* 1.10.47.1
464*Str.* 1.10.47, p. 310
465*Str.* 5.1.2, p. 444. Later Clement defines faith as voluntary preconception, this we will return to.
466*Str.* 2.4.15, p. 350
467*Str.* 7.7.48.4, p. 251

Church)? The answer might turn out to be relevant for our discussion of negative theology and ethics in Clement, since it must presumably produce some insights on his epistemology, and his understanding of dialectics, ethics and ontology.

Clement's discussion of the usefulness of Pagan wisdom and the insights of Hellenic philosophy at times revolves around a question of causality. These things Clement discusses especially in the first and the eighth book of the *Stromata*. For example he discusses whether Pagan philosophy is the direct cause of insight into the mysteries of God, or only an indirect occasion. Was philosophy sent by God or the Devil? For Clement this question is really of lesser importance. The possible evil use of knowledge made by the philosophers, does not make God the cause of this evil use, even if He is the original source of knowledge.

> "I know that many are perpetually assailing us with the allegation, that not to prevent a thing happening, is to be the cause of it happening. For they say, that the man who does not take precaution against a theft, or does not prevent a thing happening, is to be the cause of it[...]"[468]

Clement's response is that "causation is seen in doing, working, acting (τὸ αἴτιον ἐν τῷ ποιεῖν καὶ ἐνεργεῖν); but the not preventing is in this respect inoperative (ἀνενέργητον)."[469] Causation attaches to activity. When Achilles did not prevent Hector from burning the Greek ships, he was the "concurring (συναίτιος) cause"[470] not the cause as such. The idea seems to be that philosophy is a concurring cause for insight into the divine mysteries, not the cause *sine qua non*.

God is not responsible for evil, since that "[...]which does not hinder cannot be a cause."[471] Clement argues that God is not the cause of evil or sin, since sin is an activity following from the free choice of those who commit the sin: "[...]sin is an activity (ἐνεργείᾳ), not an existence (οὐσίᾳ): and therefore it is not a work of God (ἔργον θεοῦ)."[472] Thus the distinction between activity (ἐνέργεια) and existence or being (οὐσία) becomes morally relevant.[473] God is not responsible for evil, but God can use evil and sin to bring about good. Providence guides the activities of evil men, to ensure "[...]that what happens through the evils hatched (διὰ κακῶν τῶν ἐπινοηθέντων) by any, may come to a good and useful issue, and to use to

468*Str.* 1.17.82, p. 319
469*Str.* 1.17.82.3
470*Str.* 1.17.83.2
471*Str.* 8.9.28.1, p. 565
472*Str.* 4.13.93.3, p. 135. Clement talks of *οὐσία,* which in other circumstances would be translated as 'essence'. We will stick with 'existence', however, since it fits with the context and our purpose.
473Below we will relate this to the question of whether the Gnostic imitates God in being or only in action. Clement argues at one point that "[...]no action is a habit (οὐδεμία δὲ ἐνέργεια ἕξις)".

advantage those things which appear to be evils”[474]. This does not mean that evil can ever be “the efficient cause of good (ἀγαθοῦ δὲ ποιητικὸν).”[475]

Clement’s distinction between causes also seems to be present in his discussion of the use of philosophy for attaining righteousness (epistemological grounds and material causes seem to behave similarly).

> “I do not think that philosophy directly declares the Word, although in many instances philosophy attempts and persuasively teaches us probable arguments; but it assails the sects.”[476]

Again, we see that it is the critical, negative use of Hellenic philosophy that is primary. Philosophy is useful as a weapon against heresy. Also, in a classical Socratic manner (and with reference to Alcibiaedes) Clement affirms the usefulness of the knowledge of ignorance, “the first lesson in walking according to the Word (τὸ πρῶτόν ἐστι μάθημα τῷ κατὰ λόγον βαδίζοντι).”[477] It is in this way that philosophy contributes to the comprehension of truth.

> “[…]philosophy, being the search for truth, contributes to the comprehension of truth; not as being the cause of comprehension (οὐκ αἰτία οὖσα καταλήψεως), but a cause along with other things, and cooperator (συνεργός); perhaps also a joint cause (συναίτιον).”[478]

While truth is one, “many things contribute to its investigation (πολλὰ τὰ συλλαμβανόμενα πρὸς ζήτησιν αὐτῆς).”[479] On the other hand, “its discovery is by the Son (ἡ δὲ εὕρεσις δι' υἱοῦ).”[480] These “many things” are only cooperating causes, it seems, while the only primary cause of discovery is the Son himself. One way of interpreting this is, that truth comes by revelation, but there can be cooperating causes present when revelation occurs. What does Clement mean by a ‘cooperating cause’? Clement writes that,

> “[…]that which acts in conjunction with something else (μεθ' ἑτέρου ποιεῖ), being of itself incapable of operating by itself (ἀτελὲς ὂν καθ' αὐτὸ ἐνεργεῖν), we describe as co-operating (συνεργόν) and concausing (συναίτιον), and say that it becomes a cause only in virtue of its being a joint-cause (ἀπὸ τοῦ σὺν αἰτίῳ αἴτιον)[…]”[481]

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474 *Str.* 1.17.86.3, p. 320
475 *Str.* 4.5.23.1, p. 413
476 *Str.* 1.19.95, p. 322
477 *Str.* 5.3.17.1, p. 448
478 *Str.* 1.20.97, p. 323
479 *Str.* 1.20.97.3
480 *Str.* 1.20.97.3
481 *Str.* 1.20.99, p. 323

A cooperating cause is not a necessary part of truth (if a part at all). The Word is not rendered incomplete by the abstraction (ἀφαίρεσιν) of such a cause.[482] Rather a 'cooperating cause' is the means whereby truth is revealed. At least so as a negative cause, that helps thought from going 'astray'. Perspicuity (σαφήνεια) cooperates (συνεργεῖ) to communicate truth, while dialectics (διαλεκτικὴ) prevents us from falling under heresies.[483] Again it seems that philosophy, as a 'cooperating cause', has a negative function, even if Clement not explicitly says so in his definition of 'cooperating causes' (supposedly such causes can be both positive and negative).

We can now attempt to answer the question, of whether philosophy for Clement can really 'justify' anyone. Being a cooperating cause, philosophy can hardly be conceived as a cause of righteousness in any traditional sense of 'cause'. Rather it must be considered a (in modern terms) contingent, enabling condition, or rather the negation of a contingent, disabling condition.[484] But not a cause as such. The cause of righteousness is revelation or truth itself (Christ himself), but revelation is contingently (in some contexts) made possible by the philosophy that leads to obedience.

Faith, according to Clement (and against Valentinus), is the result of free choice, not a product of nature.[485] On the other hand, since God is one and beyond predicates, "we understand, then the Unknown, by divine grace (δὴ θείᾳ χάριτι)"[486]. The "power of the word (ἰσχὺς τοῦ λόγου)"[487] is given to us, and "draws to itself secretly and invisibly (ἐπικεκρυμμένως τε καὶ ἀφανῶς) every one who receives it"[488]. Hence it seems that there can be no revelation without divine initiative. Often 'synergism' is understood as salvation being something happening when God and Man meet in common efforts on the mid-way. But in Clement there is no salvation without there first being grace, it seems. Rather "the things which are in our own power" must be considered 'cooperating causes', as defined above. This means that grace (revelation) can be the complete or only efficient cause, while the works of human beings are nevertheless cooperating causes.

Though faith is voluntary, Clement likens it to the power of the Siren's song that worked "almost against (σχεδὸν ἄκοντας)" the will of those that came near.[489]

482*Str.* 1.20.99.3, p. 323
483*Str.* 1.20.100.1, p. 323
484This vocabulary is partly derived from Dancy 2004
485*Str.* 2.3, p. 349
486*Str.* 5.12.82.4, p. 464
487*Str.* 5.12.80.9
488*Str.* 5.12.80.9, p. 463
489*Str.* 2.2.9.7, p. 348

Hence the virtues[490] needed for building up knowledge on faith are, so to speak, disabling conditions that helps to disable other disabling conditions (whatever works against faith). As such the virtues are cooperating causes, while faith by free choice is the efficient cause.

But what about unbelief, the lack of faith? The reason for skepticism, Clement says, is on the one hand the "changefulness and instability of the human mind (πολύτροπον καὶ ἄστατον τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης γνώμης)", and on the other "the discrepancy which is in things (ἡ ἐν τοῖς οὖσι δια φωνί)"[491].

All opinion, judgment and knowledge is assent, Clement argues.

> "And unbelief being defection (ἀπόστασις) from faith, shows both assent and faith to be possessed of power (δυνατὴν); for non-existence cannot be called privation (ἀνυπαρξίας γὰρ στέρησις οὐκ ἂν λεχθείη)."[492]

Besides for the obviously interesting ontological implications of this statement (which we will return to below), Clement's words seems to mean that unbelief is the non-existence, but not a privation, of faith. This does not mean that unbelief is not possessed of some sort of power. It seems that for Clement negative states (or the lack of certain conditions) can be the cause of other negative states (the lack of other conditions): "What we do not, we do not either from not being able (μὴ δύνασθαι), or not being willing (μὴ βούλεσθαι) – or both."[493]

The above shows that Clement's reflections on causality in relation to such questions of faith, belief, righteousness and so on, implies some complex issues relating to the epistemological and ontological role of 'negativity' (whether as non-existence, privation or causality). It will be useful to keep these issues in mind when we come to discuss the possible relationship between Clement's negative theology and his ethics.

Negative theology and language in Clement

Traditionally, the main concepts associated with negative theologies are ἀπόφασις, ἀφαίρεσις and στέρησις, all carrying a sense of 'negation'.[494] Of these it is especially ἀφαίρεσις (abstraction) that is important i Clement. Mortley notes about Clement, that:

> "Clement is thus a Christian representative of the method of abstraction

490 Fear, patience, long-suffering, temperance. *Str.* 2.6.31, p. 354
491 *Str.* 8.7.22, p. 564
492 *Str.* 2.12.55, p. 360
493 *Str.* 2.17.77.2, p. 364
494 See above.

> which we have seen developed in contemporary Greek Middle Platonism. His interest in it is traditionally expressed, combining a definition of abstract thinking with an interpretation of the various unities of Plato's Parmenides."[495]

But Clement's abstractive thinking is based on a radical negative theology, that shapes his view of language and epistemology. Clement "[...]tends to see all language as requiring interpretation, as being in need of a hermeneutic."[496] Language is a veil that needs "negative deconstruction", and negative theology is needed in order to penetrate the mysteries. In a way all language is a parable of the divine mysteries. While it is certainly true that Clement interprets the Christian and Hebrew tradition in light of and as expressions of philosophical truths, philosophical truth itself is only a parable for the divine mystery revealed in Christ.

Proleptic epistemology in the *Stromata*

Two of the most important concepts in Clement is knowledge (γνώσις and ἐπιστήμη) and faith. Epistemology is central in this thinking. But epistemology naturally relates to ontology. The word for knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) as well as for faith (πίστις) is derived from 'στάσις', Clement argues. Both has to do with the soul settling in "that which is"[497]. In Eucledian manner Clement argues that demonstration presupposes indemonstrable, self-evident premises (axioms).[498] To hold such premises is to have indemonstrable faith, i.e. to hold something as self-evident is to have faith. Only on the foundation of such faith can knowledge be build (through demonstration).

In the second book of the *Stromata*, Clement notes that "[...]there are four things in which the truth resides – Sensation (αἰσθήσεως), Understanding (νοῦ), Knowledge (ἐπιστήμης), Opinion (ὑπολήψεως)"[499]. For human beings, sensation comes first, by which is formed opinion. For this reason "the organization of the senses tends to knowledge (τὴν τῶν αἰσθήσεων ὀργανοποιίαν πρὸς γνῶσιν)"[500]. When understanding is added to sensation, and opinion removed, knowledge is formed. This means that knowledge is essentially sensation and understanding. Understanding is (defined in another context) "a faculty of the soul (δύναμις ψυχῆς), capable of studying existences (ὄντων), - of distinguishing and comparing

495Mortley 1986, p. 44
496Mortley 1986, p. 40
497*Str.* 9.22, p. 435
498*Str.* 13.3, p. 559
499*Str.* 2.4.13.2, p. 350
500*Str.* 4.26.163.1, p. 439

what succeeds as like and unlike (τοῦ ἀκολούθου ὁμοίου τε καὶ ἀνομοίου)[...]"[501]. Understood as an activity this is more or less also the definition of dialectic (see below). The transition from sensation to knowledge is made possible by faith. Knowledge is, moreover, "an intellectual state (ἕξις), from which results the act of knowing (ἐπίστασθαι), and becomes apprehension irrefragable by reason"[502]. Ignorance, on the other hand, is "a receding impression, which can be dislogded by reason." In other words ignorance is not defined negatively in reference to knowledge, but as a positive 'something' (or it might be a privation?).

Again, there is a close connection between epistemology and ontology. The first cause of the universe can be apprehended by faith alone, since first principles are incapable of demonstration.[503] This is especially important when considering theology (we will return to ontology below). In the fifth book of the *Stromata* Clement seems to be rather critical of any idea that a proof of God's existence can be given. The many demand "demonstration as a pledge of truth"[504] Clement complains, and "there are those that deserve punishment, as to ask proofs (ἀποδείξεις) of the existence of Providence."[505] Demonstration is "discourse, agreeable to reason, producing belief (πίστιν) in points disputed from points admitted."[506] Demonstration is a syllogism resting on true premises. Faith is the presupposition of knowledge, and if faith is based on revelation from God, "[...]this faith becomes certain demonstration (ἀπόδειξις βεβαία); since truth follows what has been delivered by God."[507] But faith itself cannot be the product of demonstration, since that would require a more fundamental faith. Hence presupposing Clement's link between epistemology and ontology, attempting to give proof by demonstration for the existence of God, seems to be equivalent to saying that God is not the first principle. If there could be given a proof (in the sense of demonstration) for the existence of God (or providence), then there would be something more fundamental than God (corresponding to premisses that are not products of faith in God, but something more basic), which would serve as the basis for that demonstration.

But Clement also notes, that that providence exists is "evident from the sight of all its skilful and wise works which are seen"[508]. But again, Clement's is no 'natural

501*Str.* 6.17.154.4
502*Str.* 2.17.76.1, p. 364
503*Str.* 2.4, p. 350
504*Str.* 5.3.18.3, p. 448, modified
505*Str.* 5.1.6.1, p. 445
506*Str.* 8.3.5.1, p. 559
507*Str.* 6.8.70.3, p. 496, modified
508*Str.* 5.1.6.2

theology’. If God can be known through ‘nature’, it is only because he reveals himself there (or through that, as a cooperating cause?). Hence ‘evidence’ and ‘proof’ is obviously not the same to Clement. Probably proof has to do with demonstration, while evidence is that which is clear without any discursive reasoning. Asking for proof for something that is evident in this way is simply to ignore what is clear. We ought to have faith in the power of God, which is able to save “without proof, by mere faith (ἄνευ τῶν ἀποδείξεων διὰ ψιλῆς τῆς πίστεως)”[509].

Proofs from scripture is, it seems, only proofs “to those who have believed (πιστεύσασι).”[510] Knowledge presupposes faith, but on the other hand Clement also notes that “[...]Aristotle says that the judgment which follows knowledge is in truth faith. Accordingly, faith is something superior to knowledge, and is its criterion.”[511] This seems to contradict Clement’s former claims. But rather, both is true: “[...]neither is knowledge without faith (ἡ γνῶσις ἄνευ πίστεως), nor faith without knowledge.”[512]

Clement argues that: “Knowledge, accordingly, is characterized by faith; and faith, by a kind of divine mutual and reciprocal correspondence (θείᾳ τινὶ ἀκολουθίᾳ τε καὶ ἀντακολουθίᾳ), becomes characterized by knowledge.”[513] The reason for this reciprocity is partly Christological: Faith has reference to the Son, but in order to believe in the Son we must believe that He is the Son.[514] To know the Father we must believe in the Son, “for from faith to knowledge by the Son is the Father (ἐκ πίστεως γὰρ εἰς γνῶσιν, διὰ υἱοῦ πατήρ).”[515] The knowledge of the Son and Father is “the attainment and comprehension of the truth by the truth (ἀληθείας διὰ τῆς ἀληθείας)”[516].

Having mentioned Aristotle in the passage quoted above, Clement continues with Epicurus. In Clement’s words Epicurus defines “[...]faith to be a preconception (πρόληψιν) of the mind (διανοίας); and defines preconception to be a grasping (ἐπιβολὴν) at something evident, and at the clear understanding of the thing”[517]. Without preconception, no one can inquire, doubt, judge, or argue. It is

509*Str.* 5.1.9.2
510*Str.* 7.1.1.3, p. 523
511*Str.* 2.4.15.5, p. 350
512*Str.* 5.1.1.3, p. 473
513*Str.* 2.4.16.2, p. 350
514*Str.* 5.1, p. 444
515*Str.* 5.1.1.4
516*Str.* 5.1.1.5, p. 444. While there are sometimes hints of subordinarianism in Clement (the Son being ontologically second to the Father), this suggests a doctrine close to later orthodox trinitarianism (homoοὐσίανism).
517*Str.* 2.4.16.3, p. 350. See also Epicurus, *De Rerum Natura*

not possible to learn anything about an object without a “preconceived idea” of what one is aiming after. Learning consists in turning preconception into comprehension. Clement seems to wholeheartedly take over this element of Epicurean (and Stoic) epistemology:[518] “[...]faith is nothing else than a preconception (πρόληψίς) of the mind (διανοίας) in regard to what is the subject of discourse”[519]. Hence no one learns anything with faith, since all opinion, judgment, supposition and knowledge “is an assent (συγκατάθεσίς); which is nothing else than faith.”[520]

It is crucial for Clement’s epistemology that he emphasizes free choice as a precondition for faith:[521] “Faith is the voluntary (ἑκούσιος) supposition and anticipation (πρόληψις) of comprehension (καταλήψεως).”[522] It is not “a mere human custom (ἐπιτήδεμα), as the Greeks suppose”[523]. Clement notes that “since choice is the beginning of action, faith is discovered to be the beginning of action (ἐπεὶ δὲ πράξεως ἀρχὴ ἡ προαίρεσις, πίστις εὑρίσκεται ἀρχὴ γὰρ πράξεως)”[524]. Because of its connection with the will, for Clement faith has just as much an ethical as an epistemological significance. There seems to be a completely natural connection between faith and ‘life’: “to disbelieve truth brings death, as to believe, life; and again, to believe the lie and to disbelieve the truth hurries to destruction.”[525] This is not to say that the epistemology of faith is itself a matter of ethics. Rather ethics plays out on the scale between faith and perfection in faith: “perfection (τελειότης) in faith differs, I think, from ordinary faith.”[526] This is a matter of the character of the ‘true Gnostic’, whom Clement speaks of frequently in the *Stromata*.

God and Clement’s negative theology

Clement frequently uses negative definitions when referring to God’s properties: God is “not circumscribed by place (οὐδὲ ἀπεικονίζεταί)”, not “represented by the

518 It is not, however, clear whether his theory of names and language is *kata thesis* or *kata physis* (as the Epicurean). At one point he says that predicates are expressed “either from what belongs to things themselves (τῶν προσόντων αὐτοῖς), or from their mutual relation”. But this is exactly why the ineffable God cannot be predicated. *Str.* 5.12.82.1.
519 *Str.* 2.4.17.3, p. 351
520 *Str.* 2.12.55.1, p. 360
521 This is relevant for his polemics against those Gnostics who saw faith as something predetermined by nature or God.
522 *Str.* 2.6.27.4, p. 353, modified
523 *Str.* 2.6.30.1, p. 354, modified
524 *Str.* 2.2.9.2
525 *Str.* 4.3.8.4, p. 410
526 *Str.* 4.16.100.6, p. 427

form of a living creature (ζῴου σχήματι)".[527] God, not being mortal, has no wants and is not affected by passions (notice that these features for Clement seems to be related to mortality). God is "without beginning (ἄναρχος)", but himself "the perfect beginning of the universe, and the producer of the beginning (ἀρχὴ τῶν ὅλων παντελής, ἀρχῆς ποιητικό)."[528] The biblical story of Moses entering the thick darkness where God was, shows that "God is invisible (ἀόρατός) and ineffable (ἄρρητος)."[529] Clement's use of the story of Moses is somewhat reminiscent of Philo, whom he also quotes and discusses.[530] Clement likewise finds passages in the New Testament suitable for being interpreted as specimens of negative theology, e.g. Jn 1:18 and Paul's address to the Athenians about the "unknown god"[531]. Also, Paul's words about the "third heaven"[532], refers to "God's ineffability (τὸ ἄρρητον τοῦ θεοῦ)" and that the divine "cannot be spoken by human power".[533] Invisibility and ineffableness is "the bosom of God", which seems to mean that every divine mystery is confined or enveloped in these.[534]

We find a range of (seemingly) positive definitions. God is being (οὐσία), mind (νοῦς), and the first principle (ἀρχὴ) of "the department of action", morals, reasoning and judgment ("τοῦ λογικοῦ καὶ κριτικοῦ τόπου").[535] But most importantly, in his theology Clement radically upholds the distinction between God and creation. Not even in the dark cloud on mount Sinai can God be found: "God is not in darkness or in place, but above (ὑπεράνω) both space and time, and qualities of objects."[536] Being ungenerate/unbegotten (which follows from God being the first principle), God is "in essence remote (ὁ δὲ αὐτὸς μακρὰν ὢν ἐγγυτάτω)"[537]. Having made human beings of nothing, God "has no natural relation (φυσικὴν σχέσιν) to us"[538]. Matter is "totally distinct from God"[539], and God has "bestowed on us ten thousand things in which He does not share (ἀμέτοχος): birth, being Himself unborn; food, He wanting nothing[...]"[540] Hence God's negative properties are derived from his distinctness, though Mortley first of all reads these

527*Str.* 7.6.30.1, p. 531
528*Str.* 4.25.162.5
529*Str.* 5.12.78.3, p. 463, modified
530E.g. Philo, *De Vita Mosi*
531Acts 18:22-23, NIV
5322 Cor 12:2-4
533*Str.* 5.12.79.1, p. 463, modified
534*Str.* 5.12.79.1, p. 463
535*Str.* 4.25.162.5, p. 439. Notice that mind is not identified with the second hypostasis as it is in Plotinus.
536*Str.* 2.2.6.1, p. 348
537*Str.* 2.2.5.4, p. 348
538*Str.* 2.16.74.1
539*Str.* 2.17, p. 364
540*Str.* 5.11.68.2, p. 460

statements as expressions of anti-anthropomorphism, rather than a full blown negative theology. But they could just as well be seen as expressions of the Judeo-Christian distinction from which follows both anti-anthropomorphism and the need for more radical forms of negative theology.

Clement also notes that God dwells in an “unapproachable sanctity (ἀπροσίτῳ ἁγιότητι)” and is separated “from even the archangels”[541]. This is similar to when Clement in one of the above passages says that ‘ineffability’ is the bosom of the Father. It is not clear how far we can take these last metaphors, but they seem to imply that God is not as such ineffable, but there is some sort of gap or layer between us and God that makes God ineffable. God’s ineffableness could in this case be seen as a product of the radical distinction between creator and creation, but Clement does not say that clearly.

At any rate, all this means that God can only be known through his revelation. This might seem to contradict Clement’s idea that Hellenic philosophy also, though only partly, contains true philosophy. But then we should remember, that if the Greeks have some degree of indirect access to the mysteries, it is only because “understanding is sent by God (σύνεσιν θεόπεμπτον εἶναι).”[542] Clement is quite clear in upholding a ‘revelation theology’ that corresponds to his radical distinction between Creator and creation: “God is not capable of being taught (διδακτὸν) by man, or expressed in speech (ῥητὸν), but to be known only by His own power (μόνῃ τῇ παρ' αὐτοῦ δυνάμει γνωστόν).”[543]

Nothing in the universe has any power in itself. Animate things derive their power from God: “[…]by the universal providence of God, through the medium of secondary causes, the operative power (ἐνέργεια) is propagated in succession to individual objects.”[544]

This is probably also why the existence of providence is “evident from the sight of all its skilful and wise works which are seen” (as discussed above). This does not mean that God reveals much of himself (except for his existence) through his powers, at least not in any obvious way: “[…]it is the nature of the divine power to work all things secretly (ἐπικεκρυμμένως)”, Clement states as an argument against anyone who “alleges that he has conceived (ἐπινενοηκέναι) or made anything which pertains to creation”.[545]

As hinted at above Clement defends a degree of voluntarism when it comes to

541*Str.* 6.7.57.5, p. 493
542*Str.* 6.8.63.1, p. 494
543*Str.* 5.11.71.5, p. 461
544*Str.* 6.16.148.6, p. 515
545*Str.* 6.16.148.6, p. 515

faith. The same seems to be the case in matters of theology. Pondering on how prayer affects God, Clement notes that God is not “involuntarily good, as the fire is warming; but in Him the imparting of good things is voluntary (ἑκούσιος δὲ ἡ τῶν ἀγαθῶν μετάδοσις αὐτῷ)”[546].

Hence we might deduce that God’s goodness is not an essential property as such, but something God ‘does’. Implicit (if not almost explicit) in much of the above seems to be a distinction between God's οὐσία and ἐνέργεια. God is good, but it is more specifically his works in relation to us that are good. When speaking of epistemology, it is not God as such that is known, but God “by His own power”. Often we know things by their “powers and properties”, but not by their essence.[547] Knowledge of the powers of things does not necessarily lead to knowledge of essence. With God, his “own power” does not make it possible to put God himself into expression:

> “[…]the God of the universe, who is above all speech, all conception, all thought, can never be committed to writing, being inexpressible even by His own power (ἄρρητος ὢν δυνάμει τῇ αὐτοῦ).”[548]

So what we can know by revelation, it seems, is the powers of God. Hence it does indeed seem that we can apply the Philonic distinction between God's essence and his activities to Clement’s theological thinking. But it is crucial that God’s oneness is a core point in this. While God is essentially one, through his Son his powers become plural (see below on the Son). This is how essence relates to works.

It is also the ‘oneness’ of God that lies at the root of the need for negative theology. The Father is the One and as such “incapable of being declared (ἀπαρέμφατος)”.[549] In an important passage Clement argues that:

> “[…]since the first principle (ἀρχὴ) of everything is difficult to find out (δυσεύρετος), the absolutely first and oldest principle (πρώτη καὶ πρεσβυτάτη ἀρχὴ), which is the cause of all other things being and having been, is difficult to exhibit (δύσδεικτος). For how can that be expressed which is neither genus, nor difference, nor species, nor individual, nor number; nay more, is neither an event, nor that to which an event happens? No one can rightly express Him wholly. For on account of His greatness He is ranked as the All, and is the Father of the universe. Nor are any parts to be predicated of Him. For the One is indivisible (ἀδιαίρετον γὰρ τὸ ἕν);

546*Str.* 7.7.42.4, p. 534
547*Str.* 8.4.14.4, p. 562
548*Str.* 5.10.65.2, p. 460
549*Str.* 4.25.1.156, p. 438

> wherefore also it is infinite (ἄπειρον), not considered with reference to inscrutability (ἀδιεξίτητον), but with reference to its being without dimensions (ἀδιάστατον), and not having a limit (μὴ ἔχον πέρας). And therefore it is without form and name (ἀσχημάτιστον καὶ ἀνωνόμαστον).”[550]

What Clement says in this passage is quite similar to, e.g., Philo, Justin and Theophilus. But Clement goes a bit further. Clement mixes Aristotelian logic (”genus”, “species”, “individual” etc.), with a Pythagorean and Platonic idea of the One,[551] which he also identifies as the first principle of things. God is “the good Monad (τὴν ἀγαθὴν μονάδα)”[552]. To this he adds the claim that God is infinite, which he seems to derive from the fact that God is indivisible. Simplicity entails infinity.[553]

As Choufrine notes, for Clement it is rather the indivisibility of the One that makes it without any limit (πέρας), and thus infinite.[554] Infinity here neither seem to mean actual ‘qualitative’ or ‘quantitative’ infinity.[555] It simply means that there are no forms that can circumscribe God. Particulars “are infinite”, Clement says, and so there can be “no scientific knowledge (ὄντων μὴ εἶναι ἐπιστήμην)”[556] of such. Infinity entails (or is synonymous with) formlessness and namelessness. This means, that God’s ineffability does not just follow from the imperfections of human understanding, but is characteristic of God himself. God is “invisible (ἀόρατον), and incapable of being circumscribed (ἀπερίγραφον)”, which is linked to the fact, “that God is one”.[557] But not only is God himself incapable of being declared, but God’s philanthropy (φιλανθρωπία) is ineffable (ἄρρητος), and his hatred of evil (μισοπονηρία) is inconceivable.[558] Hence at least some of his works are also ineffable.

If the Judeo-Christian distinction is really what drives Clement's negative theology, then we should ask if not simplicity in itself is a negative definition,[559] so that God's simplicity is derived from His being different from created things, which are composite?

The simplicity and infinity of God has profound consequences for theological

550*Str.* 5.12.81.4, pp. 463-464
551Plato, *Parmenides*
552*Protr.* 9.88.3, p. 197
553The One is infinite since it has no parts. See Plato, *Parmenides* 142b-155e.
554Choufrine 2002, p. 167
555Whatever that is, think of, e.g., Mühlenberg’s claim that Gregory of Nyssa was the first to describe God as qualitatively or essentially infinite. See the discussion of Gregory of Nyssa below.
556*Str.* 8.8, p. 564
557*Str.* 5.11.74.4, p. 462
558*Protr.* 10.104.3, p. 201
559Aristotle defines 'unit' negatively. See Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 1016b

language. Following upon his argument, that since God is infinite, then God must be completely without form or name, Clement argues that:

> "[…]if we name (ὀνομάζωμεν) it, we do not do so properly, terming it either the One (ἓν), or the Good (ἢ τἀγαθὸν), or Mind (ἢ νοῦν), or Absolute Being (τὸ ὂν), or Father (ἢ πατέρα), or God (ἢ θεὸν), or Creator (ἢ δημιουργὸν), or Lord. We speak not as supplying (προφερόμενοι) His name; but for want (ἀπορίας), we use good names (ὀνόμασι καλοῖς), in order that the mind (διάνοια) may have these as points of support (ἐπερείδεσθαι), so as not to err in other respects. For each one by itself does not express God; but all together are indicative of the power of the Omnipotent. For predicates (ῥητά) are expressed either from what belongs to things themselves (τῶν προσόντων αὐτοῖς), or from their mutual relation (ἐκ τῆς πρὸς ἄλληλα σχέσεως). But none of these are admissible in reference to God. Nor any more is he apprehended by the science of demonstration. For it depends on primary and better known [principles]. But there is nothing antecedent to the Unbegotten (ἀγεννήτου). It remains that we understand, then, the Unknown, by divine grace, and by the Word alone that proceeds from Him (θείᾳ χάριτι καὶ μόνῳ τῷ παρ' αὐτοῦ λόγῳ τὸ ἄγνωστον νοεῖ);"[560]

There are many themes condensed in this passage. Clement's words on demonstration are reminiscent of what we have already discussed in relation to faith and anticipation. Also, Clement's claim that we alone understand God "by the Word" expresses the need for revelation noted above. What is new in this passage is Clement's notions about language. From the infinity of God follows that predicates are useless when speaking directly of God. Rather, the names for God are "points of support" for the mind, and as such seem to have a non-representative semiotic quality, i.e. they point towards God, without representing Him in any adequate manner. Names do not express God himself, but are indicative of the power of God. But only when they are put "all together". There is probably an implicit Christological claim in this (Christ being the unity of God's powers), as we shall see in the following chapter.

The oneness of God also has an important ethical meaning, which we will look into more extensively below. Also, we shall return to the link between God's oneness, his infinity, and the special character of theological language.

But first, some remarks on Clement's understanding of the ontology of evil and non-existence. How does Clement understand the concept 'privation'? As quoted above, Clement notes that "non-existence cannot be called privation."[561] The context has to do with faith and unbelief, but can his statement be understood in a

560*Str.* 5.12.82.1, modified
561*Str.* 12.1, p. 360

more fundamentally, in order to give us an impression of what he means by ‘privation’ and ‘non-existence’? Perhaps the answer to the latter would also give us some clues about his idea of evil, in so far as evil is, as is well-known, often defined as non-existence.

The most obvious interpretation of the passage is that evil, matter or whatever we define as the non-existent, is not a privation of something else, e.g. being or the good. Rather evil is radically non-existent. It does not even exist as ‘parasitic’ on the good (a typical way of expressing the idea that evil is privation).

This might explain why we do not in Clement find the suggestion that the good must be defined negatively in relation to evil (e.g. as the ἀπόφασις of στέρησις). God is so different from everything else, it seems, that he cannot even be defined by negating known categories (which would still be to define God in relation to these categories). This might be one reason why abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις) is more central to Clement than negation (ἀπόφασις).

Clement’s negative theology seems to keep him from holding a positive, abstract definition of ‘the good’. But neither does he talk much in terms of negative, abstract definitions of ‘the good’. Rather, what is central in Clement is what characterizes the Gnostic. As such righteousness, virtue and similar issues are more important than abstract ontological definitions of the good. Likewise is sin, conceived as action, more important than evil as an ontological class.

Maybe the reason is Christological, since such abstract ontological definitions would, it seems, bypass the Son. But only through the Son can we understand good and evil, sin and virtue.

Christology

The Son, the Word, is the image of God.[562] But the Son is, of course, also incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. In the incarnation, the Son reveals the “Father’s character to the five senses by clothing Himself with flesh.”[563]

In one of the above quoted passages Clement notes that God can only be known “by His own power (παρ' αὐτοῦ δυνάμει)”[564]. Clement adds that “the grace of knowledge is from Him by the Son”[565]. Moses when writing that “He said, and it was done”, describes the word of God as being “marked out by his work (διαγράφοντος ἔργον)”.[566] These passages are compatible with conceiving the Son

562*Protr.*, p. 199
563*Str.* 5.6.34.1, p. 452
564*Str.* 5.11, p. 461
565*Str.* 5.11.71.5, p. 173
566*Str.* 5.14.99.3, p. 468

as a power or activity of God, which is confirmed in the seventh book of the *Stromata*: "[...]the energy of the Lord has a reference to the Almighty; and the Son is, so to speak (εἰπεῖν), an energy (ἐνέργεια), of the Father."[567]

Above we have mentioned that Clement claims that God's love is ineffable. We suggested that 'love' is an ἐνέργεια of God, from which follows that at least some of God's works are ineffable, as God is himself. But rather, it seems that what Clement was saying is, that even if we can know God through his works, this does not make him less ineffable. In the forth book of the *Stromata*, Clement writes that,

> "[...]all the powers (δυνάμεις) of the Spirit, becoming collectively (συλλήβδην) one thing (ἕν τι πρᾶγμα), terminate (συντελοῦσιν) in the same point – that is, in the Son. But He is incapable of being declared, in respect of the notions of each one of His powers (τῶν δυνάμεων ἐννοίας)."[568]

From the context it seems that "He" refers to the Father (it is not the Son that is incapable of being declared). The Son is the unity of the powers of the Father, "the circle of all powers (δυνάμεων) rolled and united into one unity (εἰς ἓν)"[569].

God, the Father, is One and as such "incapable of being declared". This is not the case with the Son, exactly because the Son is not the One or simplicity but a unity of characteristics: "[...]the Son is neither simply one as one thing (ἓν ὡς ἕν), nor many things as parts, but one thing as all things (ὡς πάντα ἕν); whence also He is all things."[570]

There are obvious parallels to Neo-Platonism. If Clement account of the Father's oneness is reminiscent of Plotinus, is not this idea of the Son similar to Plotinus' idea of Nous? As the Intellect in Plotinus produces the Soul when it contemplates the One, God creates the world through the Son:

> "[...]as the Son sees the goodness of the Father, God the Saviour works, being called the first principle of all things (ἡ τῶν ὅλων ἀρχή), which was imaged forth (ἀπεικόνισται) from the invisible God first, and before the ages, and which fashioned all things which was came into being after itself."[571]

As such it seems that the Son is the boundary between the simplicity of the Father (the One), and plurality (creation). The Son can be viewed, it seems, from 'above' and from 'below'. From God's point of view, the Son is never displaced,

567*Str.* 7.2.7.7, p. 525
568*Str.* 4.25.156.1, p. 438, modified
569*Str.* 4.25.156.1, p. 438
570Ibid.
571*Str.* 5.6.38.7, p. 453

divided, severed or passing from place to place, but he is "[...]always everywhere (πάντῃ δὲ ὢν πάντοτε καὶ μηδαμῇ περιεχόμενος), and being contained nowhere; complete mind, the complete paternal light;"[572] Where mind was above identified with the Father, here it is identified with the Son. This might sound as a contradiction, but it might also simply remind us that Clement is not that far from trinitarian orthodoxy (i.e. the Father and the Son shares their characteristics).

Humanly speaking, from 'below', the Son is the revelation of God. As a matter of epistemology, the knowledge of "the word" is "the beginning of faith". That knowledge of the word is the beginning of faith seems to contradict the notion of faith as voluntary *prolepsis* and the ground of knowledge, but according to our distinctions such knowledge could be seen as a co-operating cause for faith.

True wisdom, Clement says, does not trust in "mere words (λόγοις ψιλοῖς) and oracular utterances"[573] but devotes itself to divine commands, by which it "receives a divine power according to its inspiration from the Word."[574] Clement's point seems to be, that without a spiritual, non-discursive inspiration from God (or the Logos), there can be no real wisdom or knowledge. Clement makes it clear that "the Word" is not to be given to those who are "reared in the arts of all kinds of words, and in the power of inflated attempts at proof"[575]. Of course this excludes all kinds of sophistry, but is it not an attack on all discourses not dealing with "the Word" on the basis of its self-revelation? Clement says that "the Word" is not to be committed to those "whose minds (ψυχὴν) are already preoccupied, and have not previously been emptied"[576]. Knowledge of "the Word" does not build upon other previously achieved knowledge, but must be its own precondition. Hence we are, to be sure, not dealing with an epistemological continuity between the 'natural' and the 'divine'. Also, Clement goes as far as saying that "the conceptions (ἐπίνοιαι) of virtuous men are produced through the inspiration of God (ἐπίπνοιαν θείαν)"[577]. Notice, however, that Clement is not saying that such conceptions (ἐπίνοιαι) are themselves given directly by God or identical to God's own thoughts.

Language and concealment

In a passage that also contains a distinction between God's essence and powers, as discussed above, Clement notes that:

572*Str.* 7.2.5.5, p. 524
573*Str.* 2.20.122.1
574*Str.* 2.20.122.1, p. 373
575*Str.* 1.1.8.1
576Ibid.
577*Str.* 6.17.157.4, p. 517, modified

> “[…]human speech is by nature feeble (ἀσθενὴς), and incapable of uttering God. I do not say His name. For to name it is common, not to philosophers only, but also to poets. Nor [do I say] His essence (οὐσίαν); for this is impossible, but the power (δύναμιν) and the works (ἔργα) of God.”[578]

Clement’s point here seems to be that God is, again, essentially unutterable, i.e. even if humans had no lack of capacity God would be impossible to utter. But moreover, because of the ‘feebleness’ of human speech neither can his powers be uttered. The difference between the two seems to be that the latter is not essentially unutterable. But both can be named, Clement says, which supposedly means that even if we cannot put either God’s essence or his work into speech, we can, however, put a name on these, as a means to referring to these. But while the name has an extensional (referential) quality, it does not, it seems, have any intentional quality (descriptive, predicative meaning).[579]

Clement discerns three levels of language, “names (τὰ ὀνόματα)” “thoughts (τὰ νοήματα)” and “subject-matters (τὰ ὑποκείμενα πράγματα)”.[580] Subject-matters are the things that impress thoughts (νοήματα) in us. Thoughts are the likeness of such subject-matters, and produces the same impression in all, i.e. they correspond strictly to the nature or impression of things. Names are the symbolic representations of thoughts (νοήματα).

Now, if we compare this three-fold distinction to Clement’s ontology, then if the subject-matter is the Father, the One ineffable God, who reveals himself through the Son, then it seems that thoughts (νοήματα) about God must be produced in the encounter with the Son. Clement at one instance claims, that those who learn from God “with difficulty attain to a conception of God (ἔννοιαν ἀφικνοῦνται θεοῦ)”[581].

At another instance he says that Man is by creation “endowed with a notion (ἔννοιαν) of God.”[582] Such notions does hardly reveal God in any positive, direct sense. Hence the names that we make up to describe the notions produced through the Son’s revelation of the Father, does not work as positive predicates for the Father. Rather they are, as Clement says, “points of support, so as not to err in other respects”[583].

As we have seen it is impossible to predicate something about God. But names or notions for God’s essence and work still refer to God, and when names are put together in a ‘systematic’ theology or philosophy they become a parable of God’s

578*Str.* 6.18.166.2, p. 519
579*Str.* 5.12.82. See the quotation above.
580*Str.* 8.8.23.1, p. 564, modified. “νοήματα“ should be 'thoughts' not 'conceptions'.
581*Str.* 6.18.166.3, p. 519
582*Str.* 7.2, p. 525, modified. “ἔννοιαν” should be 'notion', not 'conception'.
583*Str.* 5.12.82

mysteries. It is not completely true, however, to say that for Clement all names for God are incorrect, as Osborn does.[584] Rather the 'correctness' of names for God consists in their ability to refer to God when they come together to form a parable of the divine mysteries.

Such indirect speaking Clement discusses frequently in terms of 'concealment': "For speech (ὁ λόγος) conceals much (πολυκευθὴς γὰρ)."[585] Concealment (or veiling) can be used to hide the truth from "those who are unfit to receive the depth of knowledge (τὸ βάθος τῆς γνώσεως)"[586]. But it also has a positive function:

> "Very useful, then, is the mode of symbolic interpretation (συμβολικῆς ἑρμηνείας) for many purposes; and it is helpful to the right theology, and to piety, and to the display of intelligence, and the practice of brevity, and the exhibition of wisdom."[587]

As is common in the tradition from Philo (who drew on Stoic approaches to Greek classics), and as we have seen above, Clement reads Moses' experience in the dark cloud on Sinai as an expression of this truth. The thick darkness is where "the inaccesible and invisible notions respecting Existence (τὰς ἀδύτους καὶ ἀειδεῖς περὶ τοῦ ὄντος ἐννοίας)"[588] must be found. The point of all this is that only through faith can the knowledge of God be attained. After these initial statements in the second book Clement goes on to his definition of faith as *prolepsis*. It is faith that makes it possible to read texts allegorically, and to break through the symbols and enigmas that conceal the mysteries.

Not only are allegorical readings of Scripture useful. Symbolic interpretations of Hellenic philosophy and culture is useful as well. In the second book of the *Stromata*, Clement lets us know that it is "especially what is concealed (ἐπικεκρυμμένον) in the barbarian philosophy" that "shall be embraced".[589] By "the concealed (ἐπικεκρυμμένον)" Clement here understands "the department of symbol and enigma".[590] Not that Clement prefers advanced rhetoric for clear speech: "he who is solicitous about truth ought not to frame his language with artfulness and care"[591]. But enigmatic and symbolic language is necessary, simply because "truth has been hidden (ἐπικεκρύφθαι τὴν ἀλήθειαν) from us", from which

584 Osborn 1957, p. 39
585 *Str.* 6.15.132, p. 511
586 *Str.* 5.8.64.3, p. 457
587 *Str.* 5.8.46.1, p. 455
588 *Str.* 2.2.6.1, p. 348
589 *Str.* 2.1.1.2, p. 347, modified. "ἐπικεκρυμμένον" should be '[being] concealed', not 'occult'.
590 *Str.* 2.1.1.2, p. 347
591 *Str.* 2.1.3.2, p. 347

reasonably follows that it is especially what is concealed in philosophy that has a chance of representing truth.[592]

The "prophecies and oracles", whether Hebrew or Pagan, are (almost?) per necessity spoken in "enigmas" and "mysteries", Clement notes. All who have spoken of the "first principles of things" (whether Barbarian or Greek) have veiled the truth in "enigmas (αἰνίγμασι), and symbols (συμβόλοις), and allegories (ἀλληγορίαις), and metaphors (μεταφοραῖς), and such like tropes."[593]

The veil in the Jewish temple indicated the "truly sacred Word" in "accordance with the method of concealment (διὰ τοῦτό τοι τῆς ἐπικρύψεως τὸν τρόπον)"[594]. But concealment can be understood as a more general phenomena, which both applies to the object of the writing (intellectual truths) and the intention of a writer. Hence Heraclitus' "On Nature" present "the mind of the writer concealed"[595]. Not only is concealment necessary, it also makes the truth appear grander: "all things that shine through a veil show the truth grander and more imposing"[596]. And this, it seems, is precisely the point about the method of concealment. It is exactly by concealing the mysteries that the mysteries are represented as mysteries. Only when using enigmas and signs to represent the ineffable does the ineffability of the divine become apparent. Language and signs simultaneously represent and conceal their objects.

But again, what language conceals can be grasped only by faith. Without faith the signs have no significatory force. When it comes to the Hebrew Bible, this is why, as Clement says, "[...]faith in Christ and the knowledge of the Gospel are the explanation and fulfillment of the law". Only if one believes can he understand what is prophesied in the law and the Old Testament, i.e. what is concealed beneath these.[597]

Knowledge of philosophy in the Hellenic sense is not needed in order to express the truth in enigmas. Even if the prophets of the Old Testament did not have knowledge of philosophy, being led by God's spirit they were able to express the truth: "For the prophets and disciples of the Spirit knew infallibly their mind (ἐγνώκεσαν τὸν νοῦν). For they knew it by faith, in a way which others could not easily, as the Spirit has said."[598]

Analogy (ἀναλογιστικός) presents concealed causes "through the medium of

592 *Str.* 2.2.6.4
593 *Str.* 5.4.21.4, p. 449
594 *Str.* 5.4.19.3, p. 449
595 *Str.* 5.8.50.2, p. 456, modified
596 *Str.* 5.9.56.5, p. 457
597 *Str.* 4.21.134.3, p. 434
598 *Str.* 1.9.45.2, p. 310

signs (διὰ σημείων)”[599], Clement says.[600] Now what does Clement mean by ‘sign’ (σημείων)?

> “[…]in definitions (ὅροις), difference (διαφορά) is assumed, which, in the definitions occupies the place of sign (σημείου). […] For the things added by way of difference to the definition are the signs of the properties of things; but do not show the nature of the things themselves.”[601]

If a definition cannot be given of God, how is it possible to refer to God with signs? But signs do not refer to (they are not) predicates, but to difference, Clement seems to be saying. In other words, a sign refers to a property by distinguishing the property from other properties. The One, of course, does not contain any difference, since it would then not be one (which is also why there can be no adequate sign for the One). Neither would it be infinite, then. Hence an analogy that presents God must do so by using signs that distinguishes God from that which is not God, i.e. through negative theology. The One must be distinguished from difference as such. This is presumably why dialectics is needed to break down definitions in order to come to the understanding that God is radically different from everything else, or rather that God is that from which everything is radically different from.

Just as the Scriptures is parabolic in order to conceal the truth, Christ, “who was not of the world, came as one who was of the world to men.”[602] So while Jesus Christ is on the one hand the revelation of the father to “the five senses”, he is also hidden in the self-same means by which he is revealed. So even if Jesus Christ is the final revelation of the mysteries and prophecies, the truth is still, in a way, concealed (it requires faith to see the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth).

It should also be mentioned, that according to Clement, prophecy is not marked by the dialect it is pronounced in, exactly because it speaks indirectly.[603] Concealment, in other words, creates a degree of constancy (at the sign-level also). This seems to be why Clement believes that “Scripture is clear to all, when taken according to the bare reading”[604]. But of course Scripture is not clear to all when it comes to the things signified, since this is a matter of faith.

With the emphasis on the ‘inner’ or ‘spiritual’ meaning of the mysteries we

599*Str.* 8.9.32.6, p. 567
600Analogy can be distinguished from figure (*tropos*) and parable (*parabolê*). *Str.* 6.15.126.3-4
601*Str.* 8.6.21.2, p. 563
602*Str.* 6.15.126.3, p. 509
603*Str.* 6.16, p. 510
604*Str.* 6.15.131.3, p. 51

might think that Clement would agree with Heracleon (a Valentinian whom he quotes), that confession with "the voice" but without "faith and conduct (πίστει καὶ πολιτείᾳ)", is of little value.[605] Clement of course agrees that faith and conduct is important, but adds that the confession of voice can be the "one good work".[606] Since Clement distinguishes between the ordinary Christian and the true Gnostic, it seems reasonable that confession with both voice, faith (perhaps understood as following Christ's commandments for their own sake) and conduct belongs to the true Gnostic, while the ordinary believer can settle for less.

Not only does Clement see the Scriptures as concealing the truth through allegory, enigmas and symbols. For the above reasons he also finds it needful to write so himself. Hence he paradoxically notes that "I do not mention that the *Stromata*, forming a body of varied erudition (πολυμαθίᾳ), wish artfully to conceal (κρύπτειν ἐντέχνως) the seeds of knowledge."[607] Clement's deliberate attempt to write enigmatically suggests that there must be degrees of concealment, i.e. if concealment was 'automatic' then it would not be something to deliberate about.

The *Stromata* is "patched together", but for those who are philosophically inclined (the Gnostic), below the surface there will be truth: "For the scripture will find one to understand it (εὑρήσει γὰρ τὸν συνήσοντα ἕνα ἡ γραφή)."[608] The *Stromata* contributes to the recollection and expression of truth.[609] The *Stromata* does not carry much meaning by itself, but by the proper dialectics it helps to give birth to the truth already present in the true Gnostic (i.e. the Word/Christ). This truth, however, must be considered revealed truth, i.e. it is only the Gnostic who already has an insight into God's mysteries that will gain something from the *Stromata*.

As argued above, symbolic and enigmatic language about God implies a kind of negative theology. Mortley has noted that,

> "Clement's reflection on language is profound, and full of implications for all meta-disciplines such as philosophy and theology. He expects to find language full of enigmas, and treats theology as a generalised parable. Rational discourse is regarded as a kind of continuous symbol, an *ainigma*, or puzzle to be considered by the intellect. Rational discourse does not demonstrate reality, as Aristotle would have it, but rather it symbolises transcendent truth. Thus language itself calls for a hermeneutic."[610]

605*Str.* 4.9.71.2, p. 422
606*Str.* 4.9.74.3, p. 422. This fits better with Rom 10:9.
607*Str.* 1.2.20.4, p. 304
608*Str.* 4.2.4.3, p. 409, modified. "ἡ γραφή" should be 'scripture', not 'word'.
609Compare with Plato, *Phaedrus* 257c-279c
610Mortley 1986, p. 36

Also, when Clement says about the *Stromata* that “it will try to speak imperceptibly, to make manifest in secrecy, to demonstrate in silence”[611], Mortley takes it as a paradoxical claim about “speech as having a capacity for silence.”[612] According to Mortley, Clement’s theory of language as symbolic and concealing applies to language as such, not only metaphors or allegories, etc., as we are accustomed to think.[613] Clement does not distinguish between “the clear and the mysterious”.[614]

There is a certain Christological relevance to the theme of concealment. Mortley sees a parallel to Middle- and Neo-Platonism: In Clement the Father is inaccessible, but is revealed in the Son (the Logos), as the One is revealed through the Intellect (*Nous*). The Son has a name and can be accessed by language.[615] This should be kept in mind when we discuss what is implied when Clement talks about the Gnostic as imitating God.

Clement's ethics

In the following we will discuss the links between Clement’s theology and his ethics in the *Instructor* and the *Stromata*. The main questions are: Does Clement’s version of negative theology result in anything that can be categorized as negative ethics, e.g. *aphairetic* (as already suggested) or *apophatic*?

There will not be much comprehensive, systematic expositions of Clement's view of the different virtues. Attempting this would hardly do justice to his eclectic style. Moreover, for Clement the traditional virtues tend to be expressions of more fundamental things related to self-control and simplicity. What is relevant for our study is how the true Gnostic according to Clement arrives at these things, and how they can be described.

Anthropology and human likeness to God

As discussed above, Clement conceives of the divine relations in term of likeness. The Son is the express image of the Father. A similar relation is repeated in Clement’s anthropology. This is of course not very surprising, since also Philo and much of the Patristic tradition combined a Platonic idea of the soul’s divine likeness with Gen. 1:26. But Clement’s version is more akin to the Neo-Platonic. As the Logos is the image of God, the first principle, the image of the Logos is “the

611*Str.* 1.1.15, tr. Mortley
612Mortley 1986, p. 37
613Mortley 1986, p. 39
614Mortley 1986, p. 40
615Mortley 1986, p. 36

true man, the mind which is in man (ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἀληθινός, ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ)”[616]. The image of God is the “divine and royal Word, the impassible man”. The image of the image is the human mind.[617] Clement seems to say that Christ (the Word) is the “true man”, which is reflected in the mind of human beings. Clement distinguishes between the idea of Man and concrete human beings: “Man, then, generically considered, is formed in accordance with the idea of the connate spirit (ἰδέαν πλάσσεται τοῦ συμφυοῦς πνεύματος).”[618] Man is “not created formless (ἀνείδεος) and shapeless (ἀσχημάτιστος)”. The “idea and form of man” was, it seems, created before Adam, whom, when he was created with all the distinctions of this, he “in the act of coming into being received perfection (ὃ δὲ ἐν τῷ γίνεσθαι τὴν τελείωσιν ἐλάμβανεν)”[619].

Clement distinguishes between “the true man”, the intellect created in the likeness of the image of God, and the visible, concrete man.

> “And an image of the Word [Logos] is the true man, that is, the intellect in man, who on this account is said to have been created “in the image” of God, and “in his likeness” [Gen. 1.26], because through his understanding heart he is made like the divine Word and so reasonable. Of the earthly, visible man there are images in the form of the statues which are far away from the truth and nothing but a temporary impression upon matter.”[620]

Though Man is created in the image of God, the human soul is not ‘simple’ in the sense that it has no parts. Clement takes over a more or less traditional three-fold division of the soul, with the intellect as the ruling part.[621] The intellect is the reasoning faculty, “the inner man, which is the ruler (ἄρχων) of this man that is seen. And that one, in another respect, God guides.”[622] It is not completely clear what Clement means by this, but the point seems to be that the mind/intellect is the image of the Word, and through this God guides the rest of Man. The other parts Clement refers to as “the irascible part (θυμικόν)” and “appetite (ἐπιθυμητικὸν)”.[623]

The simplicity of God and unity of Christ is reflected in the human person. An example of this is that sexual differences are only secondary. Sexual desire “divides humanity”, into male and female. But the virtuous life is “social and holy” and

616*Protr.* 10.98.4, p. 199
617*Str.* 5.14.94.4
618*Str.* 4.23.150.2, p. 437
619*Str.* 4.23.150.4, p. 437, modified.
620*Protr.* 10.98.4, tr. Butterworth, modified
621E.g. Plato, *Phaedrus* 246A; Aristotle *De Anima*
622*Paed.* 3.1.1.2, p. 271
623*Paed.* 3.1.1.2, p. 271

based on “conjugal union”. The God of both male and female is one, just as there is one church. Circumstances of life are common, and the virtue of man and woman is the same. It is not that the nature of the sexes is by creation the same, but “there is sameness (ταὐτόν ἐστι), as far as respects the soul”[624]. Differences are only bodily. Being a liberation from the material, the reward for virtue is a life where sexual distinctions are removed, or at least play no significant role: “Common therefore, too, to men and women is the name of man.”[625] Women and men have the same capacity for virtue, and the Church is full of both “chaste (σωφρόνων) women as men”[626]. Even manliness (ἀνδρείας) is available to both, since manliness is not the ability to fight in the manner of the flesh, but a virtue that produces confidence and forbearance, as when turning the other cheek.[627] Hence manliness (or courage) is to some degree defined as a negative property.

Christ is the “express image (δόξης χαρακτήρ)” God, “who impress on the Gnostic (ἐναποσφραγιζόμενος τῷ γνωστικῷ)” his own image, transforming the Gnostic into “a third divine image (τρίτην ἤδη τὴν θείαν εἰκόνα)”.[628] As such Clement describes “the good (σπουδαῖος) man” as the “boundary (μεθόριος) between an immortal and a mortal nature”.[629] The Gnostic (supposedly identical to “the good man”) is the perfect Christian, the one who is after the image and likeness of God and imitates God as far as possible.[630] The soul of the righteous man is “a divine image, resembling God (ἄγαλμα θεῖον καὶ θεῷ προσεμφερὲς)”[631].

Likeness to Christ is hardly a ‘natural’ property, but something that only comes by virtue. Some live “according to the likeness of Christ (κατὰ τὴν πρὸς τὸν σωτῆρα ὁμοίωσιν)”, while others “live according to their image (κατὰ τὴν τούτων εἰκόνα)[...]”.[632] What does Clement refer to when he says “their image”? Does he mean that some live according to their own image? Human beings reflect what they are attached to: “the individual man is stamped according to the impression (κατὰ τύπωσιν) produced in the soul by the objects of his choice.”[633]

Paraphrasing Paul, Clement writes:

> “If ye are of me, and I am of Christ, then become imitators of Christ (μιμηταὶ Χριστοῦ γίνεσθε), and Christ of God. Assimilation to God, then, so that as far

624 *Str.* 4.8.60, p. 420
625 *Paed.* 1.4.10.3
626 *Str.* 4.8.58.2, p. 419
627 *Str.* 4.8.61.2, p. 420
628 *Str.* 7.3.16.6, p. 527
629 *Str.* 2.18.81.2, p. 365
630 *Str.* 2.19.97, p. 369. Compare Plato, Tim. 176b
631 *Str.* 7.3.16.5, p. 527
632 *Str.* 4.6.30.1, p. 414
633 *Str.* 4.23.150.2, p. 437

> as possible a man becomes righteous and holy with wisdom, he lays down as the aim of faith, and the end to be that restitution of the promise which is effected by faith."[634]

Here we see more expressly the 'layers' of imitation or likeness.[635]

Even if the soul is the "better part" of man, "neither is the soul good by nature, nor, on the other hand, is the body bad by nature (κακὸν φύσει τὸ σῶμα)".[636] It is, to be sure, the complete person, in body and soul, that is saved. The "whole man (ὅλον τὸν ἄνθρωπον)" is "purified in body and soul".[637] But again, Clement notes in the sixth book of the *Stromata*, "the likeness is not, as some imagine, that of the human form (κατὰ τὸ σχῆμα τὸ ἀνθρώπειον)"[638].

Clement notes that "conformity with the image and likeness is not meant of the body[...], but in mind and reason (κατὰ νοῦν καὶ λογισμόν), on which fitly the Lord impresses (ἐνσφραγίζεται) the seal of likeness"[639]. On the other hand Clement argues that there need to be material things in order to constitute actions. Clement writes that:

> "[...]without things intermediate (μεταξύ) which hold the place of material (ὕλης), neither good nor bad actions (πράξεις) are constituted (συνίστανται), such I mean as life, and health, and other necessary things or circumstances."[640]

Clement notes that "it is monstrous for those who are made in "the image and likeness of God," to dishonour the archetype by assuming foreign ornament"[641]. So even if the body does not reflect the image of Christ, it still has some sort of relation to the 'archetype' (or maybe the above should not be taken too philosophically). Clement also notes that "[...]amours (ἔρωτες), and diseases (νόσοι), and evil thoughts (διαλογισμοὶ) "break through" the mind and the whole man (τὸν λογισμὸν καὶ τὸν ὅλον ἄνθρωπον)."[642] Vice is reflected in the whole human person, soul and body, and results in visible evil acts.

But what about virtue? Recalling that Clement notes that "conformity with the image and likeness is not meant of the body"[643] this seems not to be the case, at least not in any positively verifiable sense. The soul is, when virtuous, adorned with

634*Str.* 2.22.136.5, p. 377, modified. "γίνεσθε" should be 'become', not 'are'. 1 Cor. 11:1.
635See also *Str.* 4.22, p. 435; *Str.* 4.24, p. 437; *Str.* 4.26, p. 441, and many other places.
636*Str.* 4.26.164.3, p. 439
637*Str.* 5.10.61.3, p. 459. See also Str. 5.6, p. 453
638*Str.* 6.14.114.4, modified.
639*Str.* 2.19.102.6, p. 370
640*Str.* 4.6.39.2, p. 416
641*Paed.* 3.11.66.2, p. 287
642*Str.* 4.6.33.5, p. 415
643*Str.* 2.19.102.6, p. 370

“righteousness, wisdom, fortitude, temperance, love of the good, modesty” etc., and, to be concrete again, this is reflected in not using such things as artificial makeups for the body. But this is not a necessary sign of virtue (not using makeup does not make a person virtuous). It seems that the relationship between soul and body is a one-way conditional (virtue in the soul=>virtue in the body, or rather, virtue in the soul=>~vice in the body).

We have seen that the soul (at least the soul of the Gnostic) is the image of Christ, who is the image of God the Father. However, in the sixth book of the *Stromata* Clement in a critique of idolatry declares that nothing among created things can be a “representation of God (ἀπεικόνισμα τοῦ θεοῦ)”[644].

At another instance Clement against the Stoics argue that “it is utterly impossible for any one to become perfect as God is”[645]. Hence Clement in this case guards the Judeo-Christian distinction. Clement also denies that “the likeness to the first cause [is] that which consists in virtue (οὐδὲ μὴν ἡ κατ' ἀρετήν, ἡ πρὸς τὸ πρῶτον αἴτιον)”, since virtue in God and virtue in man is not the same.[646] Instead, rightly understood ‘likeness’ (ὁμοίωσιν) to God consists in the “adoption and the friendship of God (υἱοθεσίαν καὶ φιλίαν τοῦ θεοῦ)”, which happens when following the teachings of Christ.[647]

One resolution to this problem might be, that even if man is “not created formless and shapeless” (as quoted), according to Clement the invisibility of souls means that it makes no sense to speak of ‘likeness’.[648] What we might ask is: are ‘invisible’ things ‘alike’ because of a privation (the lack of visibility – obviously not the case: God does not have privations), or do they have that in common that they are not capable of being ‘alike’ to anything, e.g., a negative (*apophatic*) property? The latter explanation seems more adequate. In this case Clement’s anthropology (his idea of the human soul to be more precise) is *apophatic* in the Aristotelian sense, where ἀπόφασις simply means denying that a thing belongs to a certain class. God and brutes have that in common that they are not virtuous.[649] Not because they are viceful or lack virtue (that would be a privation), but because the term ‘virtue’ is only applicable to human beings. This does not make God and brutes have anything positive in common, though. Similarly we could say that God and the human soul (ideally) have that in common that they are invisible, lacks

644*Str.* 6.18.163, p. 519, modified.
645*Str.* 7.14, p. 549
646*Str.* 6.14.114, p. 506. It is not clear from this passage, however, whether the difference is quantitative or qualitative.
647*Str.* 6.14.114.6
648*Str.* 6.8, p. 519
649Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 7, 1145a

nothing and similar *apophatic* descriptions. Only in this sense are they 'alike'.[650]

To be sure, and as noted above, Clement distances himself from the idea that the soul of human beings in any ('literal') sense can be the image or likeness of God:

> "For we do not say, as the Stoics do most impiously, that virtue in man and God is the same. Ought we not then to be perfect, as the Father wills? For it is utterly impossible for any one to become perfect as God is. Now the Father wishes us to be perfect by living blamelessly, according to the obedience of the Gospel."[651]

Living accordingly to the obedience of the Gospel does not mean an essential likeness to God, bu to "walk at once piously and magnanimously, as befits the dignity of the commandment"[652]. This is what it means to be "perfect" as the Father wills, and to imitate God.[653]

Ethics in *The Instructor*

As the above shows, since Man is made in God's image and likeness, there is an intimate connection between the soul and God. Because Man has been created after "His likeness", he contains the "love-charm (τὸ φίλτρον)"[654], the inspiration or breath of God. As such, the human being is "desirable on its own account"[655], "an object desirable for itself (αὐτὸ αἱρετὸν)"[656]. Not surprisingly Clement's anthropology has ethical as well as epistemological consequences. This is the case in the *Stromata,* as well as in *The Instructor*. Knowledge of the one seems to entail knowledge of the other. In a classical manner, Clement affirms that the greatest of all lessons is to know one's self, "[f]or if one knows himself, he will know God". By this one will be made like God, characterized by "well-doing (ἀγαθοεργῶν)" and "by requiring as few things as possible."[657]. The man with whom the Word dwells has the form which is of the Word. This makes such a person beautiful. Beauty is two-fold: 1) The beauty of the soul, beneficence, and 2) The beauty of the flesh, immortality.[658]

If Clement's negative theology had any influence on his ethics, we should expect to find negative definitions of such things as virtue and goodness in his major ethical work, *The Instructor,* and maybe even a discussion of how to define virtue

650This theme will be discussed again below.
651*Str.* 8.14, p. 549
652*Str.* 8.14, p. 549
653Clement probably has Matt. 5:48 in mind.
654*Paed.* 1.3.7.3
655*Paed.* 1.3.7.2
656*Paed.* 1.3.7.3
657*Paed.* 3.1.1.1, p. 271
658*Paed.* 3.1, p. 272

negatively. There is at least one property of God that is reflected in the Christian. In *The Instructor*, being in need of nothing (not lacking anything) is presented as a (if not *the*) primary property of the divine. God alone is in need of nothing ('indeficient') (ἀνενδεής), and "we call that perfect which wants nothing (τέλειον δὲ τὸ ἀπροσδεές φαμεν)."[659] He who knows God wants nothing.[660] Ontologically speaking, the divine, it seems, is that which is wholly without privations. This entails that God needs nothing (is indeficient), which could arguably be understood to some degree as a negatively defined property. It is hardly an instance of negative theology in the technical sense, though. But at any rate we are dealing with a simple example of how a negatively defined theological property has an impact on ethics in Clement.

The only time Clement discusses negative or privative definitions in *The Instructor* is when he refuses to understand the name 'νήπιος' (child) as a privative definition. Clement discusses the word as used descriptively of the Christians by Paul (in Romans): "[...]the name of child, νήπιος, is not understood by us privatively, though the sons of the grammarians make the νή a privative (στερητικὸν) particle."[661] Clement's point seems to be, that 'child' is here to be understood as a positive definition. If the word contained a negative definition by means of the particle νή, there would be a risk that the name referred to a privative property (ontologically) in the strict sense of lacking something (rather than just a negatively defined property implied by the privative alpha). Being a 'child' would then mean being deprived of something (adulthood?), which Clement would not allow as a proper description of the Christian (who as God does not lack anything, or at least not much, the point seems to be). The child, Clement explains, is "gentle (Ἤπιος), tender (ἁταλός), delicate (ἁπαλὸς), and simple (ἁπλοῦς), guileless (ἄδολος), and destitute of hypocrisy (ἀνυπόκριτος), straightforward and upright in mind"[662]. In a sense it could be argued that the positive term 'child' contains a range of negative definitions, but this does not seem to be Clement's belief.

Clement's use of negative theology in other instances readily proves that he does not necessarily confuse negative definitions with references to privative properties (i.e. he seems to be aware of the difference between at least στέρησις and ἀπόφασις/ἀφαίρεσις and related concepts). Why does he not define 'child' negatively, e.g. 'without evil', then? This, it seems, is related to Clement's teaching

659*Paed.* 1.6.26.2
660*Paed.* 1.5
661*Paed.* 1.5.20.1
662*Paed.* 1.5.19.3

on the Logos and his anthropology. Where the human being in other Church Fathers is, in its essence, the image of the essence of God, for Clement the human being is the image of the image, the divine Logos that expresses the otherwise hidden character of God.

But evil is defined negatively, with reference to privation (στέρησις). Licentiousness is defined as "privation of sensation (ἀναισθησίαν)"[663]. Opposition to vice follows from goodness (not the other way round, which would be a more truly *apophatic* definition of virtue): "Now hatred of evil (μισοπονηρία) attends the good man, in virtue of his being in nature good."[664] The Christian is (as with Paul) characterized by "composure, tranquility, calmness and peace."[665] None of these seem to be understood as negative definitions in Clement.

But again, the Christian first of all reflects God's self-sufficiency. Not lacking anything is a primary characteristic of the believer, and "[i]f God denies nothing, all things belong (γίνεται) to the godly."[666] This is the thread that runs through the ethics of *The Instructor* (until the last chapters of the third book where the theme of love becomes more predominant).

> "For he who has the almighty God, the Word, is in want of nothing, and never is in straits for what he needs. For the Word is a possession that wants nothing [is indeficient] (ἀνενδεὴς), and is the cause of all abundance."[667]

Hence Clement famously notes that the righteous man is only in need of food where there is no other righteous man around. It is a peculiar idea, but we get the point, which seems to have love (*agape*) as its main theme.[668] True philosophy is available to all, and its purpose is love.

> "But it is said that we do not all philosophize. Do we not all, then, follow after life? What sayest thou? How hast thou believed? How, pray, dost thou love God and thy neighbour, if thou dost not philosophize?"[669]

There is no excuse for not committing to philosophy. True philosophy is taught without letters (hence one does not need to be literate), and its handbook is love, a "spiritual treatise (σύνταγμα πνευματικόν)" which is "at once rude and divine (ἰδιωτικὸν ἅμα καὶ θεῖον)".[670] The Golden Rule, "[a]s ye would that men should do

663*Paed.* 2.4.41, p. 248
664*Paed.* 1.8.70.2, p. 227
665*Paed.* 2.7.60.5, p. 253
666*Paed.* 3.6.36.3, p. 280
667*Paed.* 3.7.39.4
668*Paed.* 3.8, p. 281
669*Paed.* 3.11.78.1, p. 290
670*Paed.* 3.11.78.2, p. 290, modified

unto you, do ye likewise to them", is "a comprehensive precept (αὐτόθεν κεφαλαιώδης ὑποθήκη)", and an all-embracing "exhortation of life (βιωτικὴ παραίνεσις)".[671] That love is in this way discussed as the finale of the *Instructor,* suggests that this is really the point of Christian ethics, and that self-sufficiency is only a prequel to this. Vice is privation, while self-sufficiency is a reflection of God's perfection. But this is only the negative side of things, a matter of avoiding sin and evil. On the positive side is love, the doing of good works. The negative side is in a very precise sense 'abstract', its purpose being abstraction from the world (notice that in this case Clement's ethics is somewhat *aphairetic* while his anthropology is rather *apophatic*, according to the above). The positive side is concrete in the sense that it has to do with action in the world. That this is a meaningful distinction applicable to Clement's thinking should become clear as we discuss his ethics in the *Stromata*. There are good reasons for thinking that the ontology of the somewhat paradoxical claims about likeness to God discussed above has to do with this ethical distinction.

We might add some remarks on Clement's view on the atonement, since this is a subject in which often crystallizes the premises of an authors theology and ethics (as such it can serve as a lense through which to view our author's presuppositions). Emancipation or liberation is central in Clement's theory of atonement. The purpose of God's law is to dissipate fear, and thereby emancipate free-will, so that faith becomes possible (arguably an important sequence).[672] The law has a purificative function that makes faith possible.

Christ is the good Samaritan that liberates us from the "rulers of darkness".[673] But Clement's atonement theory is to a large degree 'subjective'. At least he puts much weight on the moral perfection of the human subject. Christ is more than a moral teacher, to be sure, but this aspect is the one focused most extensively on by Clement. Is the reason for this Clement's peculiar interest in the 'Gnostic', or are there more fundamental reasons for prioritizing the moral and subjective aspect of the atonement? (i.e. would he had focused on other aspects if he had written to another audience, etc.?).

> "The Word, who in the beginning bestowed on us life as Creator (δημιουργός) when He formed us, taught us to live well when He appeared as our Teacher; that as God He might afterwards conduct us to eternal life."[674]

671*Paed.* 3.12.88.1, p. 292
672*Paed.* 3.12.87, p. 292
673*QuisDiv.* 28
674*Protr.* 1.7.3, p. 173

Christ is the “Saviour sent down – a teacher and leader in the acquisition of the good”.[675] In a passage that has a striking similarity with the Irenaen-Athanasian motto “God became Man, so that man may become God”, Clement notes that:

> “[…]the Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God (ὁ λόγος ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος γενόμενος, ἵνα δὴ καὶ σὺ παρὰ ἀνθρώπου μάθῃς, πῇ ποτε ἄρα ἄνθρωπος γένηται θεός).”[676]

Hence ontology (the change of the ontological status of man) is closely tied to ethics. But though emphasizing human subjectivity, Clement does not forget the role of God’s will in the proces of deification: “man becomes God, since God so wills (θεὸς δὲ ἐκεῖνος ὁ ἄνθρωπος γίνεται, ὅτι βούλεται ὁ θεός)”[677], and “the Word Himself is the manifest mystery: God in man, and man God (Λόγος γὰρ ωὐτός· μυστήριον ἐμφανές· θεὸς ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ, καὶ ὁ ἄνθρωπος θεός)”[678]. This last phrase seems to imply a deeper ontological meaning of Christ’s presence than mere ‘teaching’.

As instructor God is not only a moral teacher. He also uses a range of measures to discipline those who he saves. Hence admonition, complaint, invective, reproof, visitation, denunciation, accusation, censure, objurgation, indignation etc. are all tools that God use to lead us to knowledge of the truth.[679]

For Clement there is a narrow connection between epistemology, ontology and ethics. Hence moral perfection means a real ontological change, and *vice versa.* There is no doubt, however, that salvation is an epistemological concern.

Ethics in the *Stromata*

In what we have remaining from the introduction to the *Stromata*, Clement continues the thematic from *The Instructor*. Knowledge comes by right teaching. The final purpose of knowledge (teaching and learning) is to make “faith active by love (τὴν πίστιν διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης)”, or at least this serves as the criteria for approving knowledge.[680] The relationship between knowledge and action is, Clement says, such that first comes knowledge, from which arises an impulse that results in (rational) action.[681] In other words there is a spontaneous relationship between knowledge and action (through impulse), so that knowledge is not just

675*Str.* 5.1.7.8, p. 446
676*Protr.* 1.8.4, p. 174
677*Paed.* 3.1.1.5
678*Paed.* 3.1.2.1
679*Paed.* 1.9, pp. 229-230
680*Str.* 1.1.4.1, p. 300
681*Str.* 6.8, p. 496

instrumental. Knowledge and ignorance are "the boundaries of happiness and misery (ὅρους εὐδαιμονίας κακοδαιμονίας)"[682]. Though Clement speaks in *eudaimonistic* terms, he is reluctant to identify perfection with 'happiness': Man can be virtuous without necessarily being happy.[683] The virtuous person can be affected by disease, though it is not virtue itself that is affected. But if the habit of self-command has not been sufficiently developed, the inability to endure disease "is found equivalent to fleeing" from virtue. Virtue is not in itself enough, it also needs to be established by a "habit of self-control (ἕξιν τῆς ἐγκρατείας)".[684] Clement's ethics is hardly *eudaimonistic*. It is not happiness that is the aim of virtue, but likeness to God.

As noted above, in the negative, there are obvious connections between God's lack of privations and ethics. God does not have such and such properties (privations), and therefore there are particular ways in which we do not act. This has an impact on religious practices:

> "[...]we rightly do not sacrifice to God, who, indeficient (ἀνενδεεῖ), supplies all men with all things; but we glorify Him who gave Himself in sacrifice for us, we also sacrificing ourselves; from that which needs nothing to that which needs nothing (εἷς τε τὸ ἀνενδεὲς ἐκ τοῦ ἀνενδεοῦς), and to that which is impassible from that which is impassible (εἰς τὸ ἀπαθὲς ἐκ τοῦ ἀπαθοῦς). For in our salvation alone God delights."[685]

Rather than sacrificing to God, Christians are to imitate Him by becoming impassible. The connection between theology and ethics seems straightforward. But ethics works in different levels. The purification of body and soul through abstinence from evil things, is the "perfection of the common believer (ἁπλῶς τοῦ κοινοῦ πιστοῦ)"[686]. This category (the common believer) does not only encompass the ordinary Christian, but also "Jew and Greek".[687] A Greek that abstains from sacrificing to idols is closer to truth than the Pagans that do not abstain from such practices.

For the Gnostic, "righteousness advances to activity in well-doing (δικαιοσύνη εἰς ἐνέργειαν εὐποιίας προβαίνει)."[688] The Gnostic is the person who "abides in the fixed habit (ἀμεταβόλῳ ἕξει) of well-doing (εὐποιίας) after the likeness of God

682*Str.* 5.14.140.5, p. 475
683Compare with Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*
684*Str.* 4.5.20.2, p. 413, modified
685*Str.* 7.3.14.5, modified
686*Str.* 6.7.60.2
687*Str.* 6.7.60.3, p. 494
688*Str.* 6.7.60.3

(ὁμοίωσιν τοῦ θεοῦ).”[689]

It is not necessary, however, to be a Gnostic to do good works: “do not those who are called orthodox apply themselves to good works, knowing not what they do (οὐκ εἰδότες ἃ ποιοῦσιν)?”.[690]

It does seem however, that in distinction to the ordinary Christian, the Gnostic does good works for their own sake: “[…]he who does any duty for the sake of recompense, is he not held fast in the custom of the world, either as one who has done well, hastening to receive a reward, or as an evil-doer avoiding retribution?”[691] The Gnostic does “good out of love, and for the sake of its own excellence (αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν)”[692]. The Gnostic never desires knowledge of God for instrumental, practical reasons.

From the above it might seem that there are two ‘classes’ of Christians (or believers), but this should not be conceived of too radically, and certainly not be confused with the rigid distinctions typically associated with forms of Gnosticism. There are not, Clement argues, “[…]in the same Word some “illuminated’ (gnostics); and some animal (or natural) men;” but all who have abandoned the desires of the flesh are equal and spiritual before the Lord.”[693]

Of course it could be argued that these claims are from a more ‘popular’ work (the *Instructor*), and that what we find in the *Stromata* portrays a somewhat esoteric doctrine. But even if Clement sometimes seem to make a discrete distinction, rather than belonging to an altogether separate class of Christians, the Gnostic is the Christian who on top of faith has build knowledge (gnosis). Faith is two-fold, not in the sense of any radical distinction, but in the sense that it “admits of growth (αὔξησιν) and perfection (τελείωσιν); for the common faith (κοινὴ πίστις) lies beneath as a foundation.”[694] The purpose of “the faith which results from instruction and the word” is “the performance of the commandments (ἐντολὰς ἐπιτελεῖν).”[695]

Practice is in Clement (often) the consummation of perfection in faith. At other instances Clement adds teaching to the result of perfection:

> “Thus also it appears to me that there are three effects of gnostic power (γνωστικῆς δυνάμεως): the knowledge of things; second, the performance of whatever the Word suggests; and the third, the capability of delivering, in a

689*Str.* 6.7.60.3
690*Str.* 1.9.45.6, p. 310
691*Str.* 1.1.9.3, p. 301
692*Str.* 4.22.135.4, p. 434
693*Paed.* 1.6.31.2, p. 217
694*Str.* 5.1.2.4, p. 444
695*Str.* 5.1.2.6, p. 444

way suitable to God, the secrets veiled in the truth."[696]

At least in this passage it seems that Clement conceives of perfection as consisting in three stages, though he does not claim that the "three effects" follow chronologically or even logically upon each other.

At any rate, deification is the aim of the Gnostic life. Deification is to be made incorruptible, whereby one participates in divinity, "the power of the incorrupt One (τοῦ ἀφθάρτου δυνάμεως)"[697]. Simplicity is absolutely crucial here. Clement quotes the "Pythagorean saying", that "man ought to become one (ἕνα γενέσθαι καὶ τὸν ἄνθρωπον δεῖ)"[698]. Christ, "the high priest himself is one, God being one (αὐτὸς ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς εἷς, ἑνὸς ὄντος τοῦ θεοῦ)"[699]. When Man is deified into a passionless state, he "becomes a unit (μοναδικὸς γίνεται)", and thus becomes like Christ.[700] To believe in the Son, and by the Son, "is to become a unit (μοναδικόν ἐστι γενέσθαι), being indissolubly united in Him; and to disbelieve is to be separated, disjoined, divided."[701]

As noted above, this is not because the Son is One or simplicity as such (this is a, or rather the, characteristic of the Father), but because the Son is "one thing as all things (ὡς πάντα ἕν)" and "the circle of all powers rolled and united into one (ἓν) unity."[702]

Self-control (ἐγκράτεια), self-mastering (αὐτεξούσιον) and similar, and the lack of slavery, is crucial for Clement. Not being a master of oneself carries its own punishment: "[...]it is the greatest boon to a bad man not to be master of himself (αὐτεξούσιον)"[703]. God's greatest gift is self-control (ἐγκράτεια), Clement says in the second book of the *Stromata*.[704] Self-control "does not overstep what appears in accordance with right reason (τῶν κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον φανέντων)"[705]. Clement adds that "[t]emperance (σωφροσύνη), too, is not without manliness"[706]. Hence these things seem to be somehow derived from self-control. From such virtues spring wisdom, "which follows (ἑπομένη τῷ διατεταγμένῳ) God"[707] and righteousness, which "imitates the divine character (μιμητικὴ τῆς θείας

696*Str.* 7.1.4.2
697*Str.* 5.10.63.8, p. 459
698*Str.* 4.23.151.3, p. 437
699*Str.* 4.23.151.3
700*Str.* 4.23.152.1, p. 437
701*Str.* 4.25.157.2, p. 438
702*Str.* 4.25.156.2, p. 438
703*Str.* 2.19.99.3, p. 369
704*Str.* 2.20, p. 374
705*Str.* 2.18.80.4
706*Str.* 2.18.80.5
707*Str.* 2.18.80.5

διαθέσεως)”[708].

Above we have noted that Clement is no radical voluntarist, since, though based on will, faith needs the support of the virtues in order to be operative. But he is as close as it gets: “volition (βούλεσθαι) takes the precedence of all; for the intellectual powers are ministers of the Will (λογικαὶ δυνάμεις τοῦ βούλεσθαι διάκονοι).”[709] Clement’s point seems to be, that in the true Gnostic, the “intellectual powers” are fully accommodated to the will: “in the Gnostic, Will, Judgment, and Exertion are identical. For if the determinations are the same, the opinions and judgments will be the same too;”[710]. It seems to be implied that this is not the case in the non-Gnostic.

As is common in Patristic literature, Clement gives us an interpretation of the beatitudes. The “meek (οἱ πραεῖς)”, Clement says, are “those who have quelled the battle of unbelief in the soul, the battle of wrath, and lust, and the other forms that are subject to them.”[711] Clement stresses that Jesus “praises those meek by choice (κατὰ προαίρεσι)”[712], so again a virtue like meekness derives its value from self-control and the exercise of will. Similarly, “mercy (ἔλεος)” is not just “pain on account of others’ calamities (λύπη ἐπ' ἀλλοτρίαις συμφοραῖς)”[713], but the merciful are those who do acts of mercy, as well as those who wish to do such acts, even if they are not able (mercy is not a ‘passion’, Clement’s reasoning seems to be, but a matter of will).[714]

The “pure in heart (τοὺς καθαροὺς τὴν καρδίαν)”, are those who have reached a state of “impassible identity (ταὐτότητος ἀπαθοῦς)”[715]. Such a person does not need intermediates to relate to the good What Clement calls “things intermediate (τῶν μεταξύ)”[716] are necessary to constitute good and bad actions (as discussed above). But what becomes of “good and bad actions” if there are no intermediates? The ‘pure in heart’ does not just have science and knowledge, but is science and knowledge, i.e. such a person is the intermediate, it seems. This fits well with what we have noted above, that the Gnostic is the boundary between mortal and immortal nature.[717] As Clement so often stresses the point of knowledge is the doing of good works. This is an activity rather than just a habit, but habits can of

708*Str.* 2.18.80.5
709*Str.* 2.17.77.5, p. 364
710*Str.* 2.17.77.5, p. 364
711*Str.* 4.6.36.2, p. 415
712*Str.* 4.6.36.2
713*Str.* 4.6.38.1
714*Str.* 4.6.38.1, p. 416
715*Str.* 4.6.40.1
716*Str.* 4.6.39.3
717*Str.* 2.18, p. 365; *Str.* 4.6, p. 416

course be the cause of good works. The Gnostic, it seems, is the person who have internalized the co-operating (intermediate) causes that is necessary to produce good works.

The “peacemakers (οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί)” are those “who have subdued and tamed the law which wars against the disposition of the mind (τῷ φρονήματι τοῦ νοῦ)”[718]. Perfect peacemaking “is that which keeps unchanged (ἄτρεπτον) in all circumstances what is peaceful”[719]. The ‘peacemaker’ will consider “the opposites (ἐναντιότητας) that are in the world to be the fairest harmony of creation (ἁρμονίαν κτίσεως)”[720]. The will of God is “the loving of all things because all things bear a relation to the whole (ἅπαντα)”[721]. This is a positive definition of love, presumably related to the fact that everything is united in Christ (though it might sound stoic). To have “recourse to faith and peace” means to “despise death”, and to “not detest our persecutors” (a negative definition of love, not resisting evil).[722]

As we see above, self-control and self-mastery is crucial. But this is only the ‘negative’ side of the coin (or rather 'abstractive', that which has to do with being simple). It is not enough, says Clement, to be “justified by abstinence from what is evil (ἀποχῇ κακῶν)” (he does not specify whether this is actually possible at all). In addition to abstinence must come perfection “by Christlike beneficence (κυριακῇ τελειωθεὶς εὐποιίᾳ).”[723]

At an early stage in the *Stromata*, imitation of Christ is central in Clement’s ethics: “We must, as far as we can, imitate the Lord (τὸν κύριον μιμεῖσθαι).”[724] Imitation of Christ means complying with the will of God. Loving Christ (our true ‘neighbour’, who as the good Samaritan comes to our help) means following his commandments, i.e. loving others.[725] If self-control and abstinence is the ‘negative’ side of the coin, faith, hope and love (the traditional ‘theological virtues’), what Clement calls “the sacred Triad (ἡ ἁγία τριάς)” is the ‘positive’ side.[726] The Golden Rule, ‘do unto others...’[727], is an all-embracing “exhortation of life”. When using a virtue-oriented language, Clement defines love much like Paul in 1 Cor, as meekness, mildness, patience, liberality, freedom from envy, absence of hatred, forgetfulness of injuries. Other virtues dealing with neighborly love are hospitality,

718*Str.* 4.6.40.2
719*Str.* 4.6.40.3, p. 416
720*Str.* 4.6.40.3
721*Str.* 4.12.86.1, p. 424
722*Str.* 4.6.41.1
723*Str.* 4.6.29.2, p. 414
724*Str.* 1.1.9.4, p. 301
725*QuisDiv.* 28
726*Str.* 4.7.54.1, p. 419
727Luk 6:31

philanthropy, defined as “brotherly love to those who have fellowship, in the same spirit (τοῦ αὐτοῦ πνεύματος κεκοινωνηκόσιν)”[728].

Hope Clement defines as “the expectation of good things, or an expectation (εὔελπις) sanguine of absent good”, which arguably gives hope a somewhat ‘erotic’ meaning (in the Platonic sense).[729] On the other hand “[...]love is not desire (ὄρεξις) on the part of him who loves (τοῦ ἀγαπῶντος); but is a relation of affection (στερκτικὴ δὲ οἰκείωσις), restoring the Gnostic to the unity of the faith – independent of time and place.”[730] What this “relation of affection (στερκτικὴ δὲ οἰκείωσις)”, does more precisely consist in is not clear, but the crucial point is that its end is unity. Especially in regard to philanthropy we also see the importance of unity: A precondition for philanthropy is that “persons are brought to sameness by consent (ἡ ὁμογνωμοσύνη συμφωνία γνωμῶν)”[731].

There are concrete consequences of this theological anthropology and ethics. For example, the unity of God’s Word grounds a sense of solidarity and equality of ownership: “God brought our race into communion by first imparting what was His own, when He gave His own Word, common to all, and made all things for all (πάντα ποιήσας ὑπὲρ πάντων).”[732] All things are common, Clement argues, and the rich should share what they have, but do not need.

On the other hand, despite of his awareness of the importance of '*agapic*' love, the Decalogue is not interpreted as an expression of, e.g., the Great Commandment,[733] or the Golden Rule (as it would be following Luke 6:31). Rather the decalogue is interpreted on the one hand with reference to number-symbolism, on the other as metaphorically (analogically) relating to philosophical questions (e.g. the commandment not to steal is interpreted as forbidding stealing doctrines). This is probably due to the fact that love for Clement itself expresses a deeper virtue, namely simplicity (as noted above this is crucial in Clement’s ethics of divine imitation since God is first of all the One). Even if it can be characterized in numerous ways, most importantly love is “incapable of being divided (ἀμέριστός) or distinguished (ἀδιάκριτος): its nature is to communicate (κοινωνική).”[734] Hence oneness and simplicity is of great importance. In the Church “different nations and natures (διαφόρων ἐθνῶν τε καὶ φύσεων)” come together in the unity of the

728*Str.* 2.9.42.1, p. 357, modified
729*Str.* 2.9.41.1, p. 356
730*Str.* 6.9.73.3, p. 497
731*Str.* 2.9.42.3, p. 357
732*Paed.* 2.12.120.3, p. 268
733Matt 22:35-40
734*Str.* 2.18.87.2

faith.[735] The Church is “the principle of union (ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς συστάσεως)”, and “in its oneness (κατὰ τὴν μονάδα)” it surpasses all things.[736] Also, “friendship is consummated in likeness (ὁμοιότητος); the community lying in oneness (ἐν τῷ ἑνὶ).”[737] This also means that the Gnostics choose and desire “the same things”.[738]

But love is not reserved for other Christans. Clement emphasizes “[t]he absence of respect of persons in God (ἀπροσωπόληπτον τοῦ θεοῦ)”. Philanthropy also means bringing other human beings into that unity of love which is the Church, through witnessing.

The ethical function of dialectics

Much central for understanding his ethics, is Clement’s definition of dialectics. Dialectics, the “opposing of one argument by another (λόγῳ λόγον ἀντικεῖσθαι)”[739] (supposedly dialectics), is like a “pruning-hook (δρέπανον)” that cuts the thorns from the vines.[740] Dialectics is “a bulwark (θριγκὸς)” (or a fence) against the Sophists.[741] By practicing dialectics the Gnostic learns to distinguish between the knowledge of God and timely matters, whereby he also learns how to abstract himself from the body and its pleasures.

In the first book of the *Stromata* Clement notes that “[d]ialectics (διαλεκτική), according to Plato, is, as he says in *The Statesman,* a science (ἐπιστήμη) devoted to the discovery of the explanation (δηλώσεως εὑρετική) of things.”[742] To this definition Clement adds that “true dialectic” is “philosophy mixed with truth”[743], the activity by which the Gnostic is “examining things (ἐπισκοποῦσα τὰ πράγματα), and testing forces and powers (δυνάμεις καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας δοκιμάζουσα)”. Thereby the Gnostic “gradually ascends in relation to the most excellent essence of all (πάντων κρατίστην οὐσίαν), and essays to go beyond to the God of the universe”[744]. From this “follows a suitable course of practice with respect to word and deeds, even in human affairs (ἡ περὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπείων περί τε τοὺς λόγους καὶ τὰς πράξεις οἰκεία χρῆσις).”[745]

By dialectics the Gnostic fixes on “the distinction of genera into species, and will master the distinction of existences, till he come to what are primary and simple

735*Str.* 7.6.34.2, p. 532
736*Str.* 7.17.107.6, p. 555
737*Str.* 7.11.68.2, p. 542
738*Str.* 7.12, p. 545
739*Str.* 6.8.65.1
740*Str.* 6.8.65.5, p. 495
741*Str.* 6.10.81.4, p. 499
742*Str.* 1.28.176.3, p. 340
743*Str.* 1.28.177.1
744*Str.* 1.28.177.1, p. 340
745Ibid.

(τῶν πρώτων καὶ ἁπλῶν).”[746] More precisely Clement says that:

> “[…]true dialectic is the science (φρόνησίς) which analyses the objects of thought (τὰ νοητὰ διαιρετική), and shows abstractly and by itself the individual substratum of existences (ἑκάστου τῶν ὄντων ἀμίκτως τε καὶ εἰλικρινῶς τοῦ ὑποκειμένου δεικτική), or the power of dividing things into genera, which descends to their most special properties, and presents each individual object to be contemplated simply such as it is (οἷον ἔστι).”[747]

Only dialectics “conducts to the true wisdom”. True wisdom is: “[…]the divine power which deals with the knowledge of entities as entities (τῶν ὄντων ὡς ὄντων γνωστική), which grasps what is perfect, and is freed from all passion”. But wisdom is only reached, however, when the Saviour reveals the father, to whom he wills.[748] True dialectic only comes about by revelation (“κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν”), as the Son reveals the Father, when he withdraws (καταγαγόντος) “the gloom of ignorance arising from evil training“.[749]

Revelation has a negative function. When the ‘veil’ is removed, God is contemplated as He is. Above we have suggested that for Clement, God is in principle unknowable. This is, however, contradicted by a passage in the sixth book of the *Stromata*. Here Clement acknowledges that some “comprehends that things incomprehensible are incomprehensible (καταλαμβάνοντος, ὅτι ἀκατάληπτα ἔσται τὰ ἀκατάληπτα)”[750], but the Gnostic, he argues, “comprehends what seems to be incomprehensible (δοκοῦντα ἀκατάληπτα) to others; believing that nothing is incomprehensible to the Son of God, whence nothing incapable of being taught (ἀδίδακτον).”[751] It is doubtful, however, that Clement by this means that the Gnostic comprehends God in a positive sense. Rather the Gnostic knows God by what He is not (see the quoted passage below), i.e. through a negative theology.

The Gnostic acquire his knowledge by training himself “in scientific speculation (ἐπιστημονικῇ θεωρίᾳ)”, whereby “he proceeds to exercise himself in larger (καθολικώτερον) generalizations and grander propositions;”[752]. For this person, practicing his skills in disciplines such as astronomy is useful. In astronomy we conceive of depth without breadth, etc., and so this is an example of dialectical and abstractive reasoning.[753] This is not because ‘theoretical’ or ‘scientific’ knowledge

746*Str.* 6.10.80.4, p. 498
747*Str.* 1.28.177
748Ibid.
749Ibid.
750*Str.* 6.8.70.1
751*Str.* 6.8.70.2, p. 496
752*Str.* 7.11.61.1
753*Str.* 6.11, p. 501

in itself brings salvation, but because the theoretical ability of abstraction can be translated into ethical abstraction, so to speak.

There is a close link between knowledge and ontology. The ability of intellectual abstraction and virtue is linked, since virtue is abstraction from the body: True piety consists in "unswerving abstraction (ἀμετανόητος χωρισμός) from the body and its passions."[754] Though Clement here uses a term that is better translated as separation (χωρισμός), rather than abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις), this is arguably an example of what we have called an *aphairetic* ethics. Large portions of Clement's ethics is negative, but not in the strict sense of an *apophatic* ethics, where continual negation of the characteristics of the human subject is the way to perfection.

Clement does note, to be sure, that he who professes abstinence from what is bad is perfect (though there is no one perfect in all things, while still human, except Jesus Christ himself).[755] But there is not much *apophatic* ethics in Clement, if by this we mean that the good is defined negatively to evil, and that moral progress requires negation of evil: "the choice which is truly gracious (τὴν ἀληθῶς εὐχάριστον ἐκλογὴν)" does not consist "in the way of rejection of other things as bad (κατὰ ἀπεκλογὴν τῶν ἑτέρων ὡς φαύλων)", but "as to do things better than what is good (καλῶν καλλίονα ποιεῖσθαι)".[756] The good, or the perfect, is to be chosen for its own sake, and negation (epistemologically) or rejection (ethically) of the bad is not synonymous with positively affirming or choosing the good. In an *aphairetic* ethics, as Clement's, the way to perfection is rather abstraction (perhaps by way of dialectics and analysis), whereby the good can be chosen on its own terms. The purpose of such abstraction is unmixed unity.[757] In a famous passage Clement writes that,

> "We shall understand the mode of purification by confession (καθαρτικὸν τρόπον ὁμολογίᾳ), and that of contemplation by analysis (ἀναλύσει), advancing by analysis to the first notion, beginning with the properties underlying it; abstracting (ἀφελόντες) from the body its physical properties, taking away (περιελόντες) the dimension (διάστασιν) of depth, then that of breadth, and then that of length. For the point (σημεῖόν) which remains (ὑπολειφθὲν) is a unit (μονὰς), so to speak, having position; from which if we abstract (περιέλωμεν) position, there is the conception of unity. If, then, abstracting all that belongs to bodies and things called incorporeal, we cast ourselves into the greatness of Christ (τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ Χριστοῦ κἀκεῖθεν),

754*Str.* 5.11.67.1, p. 460
755*Str.* 4.21
756*Str.* 4.23.149.1, p. 437
757*Str.* 5.11, p. 461

> and thence advance (προΐοιμεν) into immensity by holiness, we may reach somehow to the thought (νοήσει) of the Almighty, knowing not what He is, but what He is not (οὐχ ὅ ἐστιν, ὃ δὲ μή ἐστι γνωρίσαντες).”[758]

Through abstraction is reached a final point, a σημεῖόν, a trace or a sign, beyond which lies “the greatness of Christ”. But this must also be negated. Hence after abstraction follows negation. The final move is not *aphairetic,* but *apophatic.*

For Clement analysis is a kind of reversed demonstration, that goes back through the “points (τῶν ἀποδεικνυμένων)” of a proof to that which is “self-evident” or “evident to sense and to understanding (αἴσθησίν τε καὶ νόησιν ἐναργῆ).”[759] As noted above Clement identifies the axioms of demonstration with faith. Hence through analysis the Gnostic abstracts God (the One) from everything else. By this he also learns to abstract himself from everything else, thereby similarly becoming ‘one’ (but only similarly in a, perhaps, negative sense, since nothing is like to God!). The Gnostic is the “man who is admitted to holiness being illuminated in order to indissoluble union.”[760]

Knowledge of the Word leads to a “readiness for adopting a right mode of life (πολιτείας προθυμίαν)”[761]. Its final significance is practical. From this perspective, the Son becomes a moral teacher. Through his revelation he saves by teaching us how to abstain from evil, and how to obtain a virtuous life that will lead to likeness to God. In this way Clement's idea of dialectics is arguably present in his idea of prayer. Prayer is an integral element of the perfection of the Gnostic. Though being without words, prayer is conversation with God.[762] In prayer the Gnostic is united “to the Spirit” through “boundless love (ἀορίστου ἀγάπης)”[763], and made like the Lord, “[...]through care of the beneficence which has us for its object; and [...] through worship, through teaching and through beneficence in deeds (δι' ἔργων εὐποιίαν).”[764] Prayer is a ‘way of life’ or a certain state of fellowship with God.[765]

That the Gnostic is in some way ‘abstracted’ from things does not mean that Clement endorses the radical lifestyle that we know from some of his contemporaries, e.g. the ascetics of the deserts. Rather, the Gnostic “lives in the city as in a desert (καθάπερ ἐν ἐρημίᾳ τῇ πόλει βιοῖ)”.[766] Also, Clement notes that

758*Str.* 5.11.71, p. 461, modified. A similar reasoning can be found in Albinus, *Didaskalikos* 165, 1.14
759*Str.* 8.3.8.1, p. 560
760*Str.* 7.3
761*Str.* 1.1.4.3, p. 300
762*Str.* 7.7, p. 534
763*Str.* 7.7.44.6, p. 535
764*Str.* 7.3.13.2
765*Str.* 7.7.40.3
766*Str.* 7.12.77.3, p. 545

“he is alone pious that serves God rightly and unblameably in human affairs (περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια).”[767] But virtue is not, like speech, perfected “from everyday occurences”[768]. So the point in 7.1 seems not to be that committing to human affairs is a way of doing God’s will, but rather that it is only really possible to be pious in (or in relation to) the midst of human affairs. When it comes to human things, the Gnostic rises above both good and bad.[769] The same sentiment is reflected in Clement’s view on marriage. So though Clement’s ethics is arguably ‘*aphairetic*’, in practice it will look like an ‘ethics of invisibility’, since the Gnostic is not, it seems, that different from others.

Moral ontology and epistemology

The following discusses the relationship between such notions as οὐσίᾳ, ἐνέργεια, τὸ εἶναι, τοῦ γίνεσθαι, τὸ ἔπεσθαι and the idea of imitating God. This is helpful in establishing a conception of *epektasis* in Clement, and thus for formulating an idea of Clementine theological ethics as *theologia viatorum*.

Being and becoming, deification and imitation

Being (to be, εἶναι) and becoming (to become, τοῦ γίνεσθαι) should be distinguished (“διαφέρει τε τὸ εἶναι τοῦ γίνεσθαι”) as should cause and effect, Clement notes.[770] Now, Clement does not directly identify cause with being, and effect with becoming, but it seems that there is a tight connection between these. Clement also distinguishes activity from existence.[771] Granted some degree of identity between becoming and effect, Clement’s point seems to be that activities are not ‘beings’ but ‘becomings’. If so, this is highly relevant to the ethics of imitating God, as will be discussed below: Ethically speaking, perfection is a matter of becoming (rather than being) an image of Christ.

For Clement likeness to God essentially means to be abstracted, and as such simple. Thus we are dealing with a negative likeness. But imitation of God is not only a question of negation or abstraction. The latter is true for essence, having to do with being. But rather than being what we might call a static mirroring of essence, ‘likeness’ to God consists in the “adoption and the friendship of God”, and is a matter of following the teachings of Christ.[772] The Gnostic is an animate or living image, the symbol of God's power. Clement says that:

767*Str.* 7.1.3.4, p. 524
768*Str.* 7.8, p. 528
769*Str.* 7.12, p. 546
770*Str.* 8.9, p. 566
771*Str.* 4.13, p. 426
772*Str.* 4.14, p. 506

> "[...]the Gnostic, considering the benefit of his neighbours as his own salvation, may be called a living image of the Lord (ἄγαλμα ἔμψυχον εἰκότως ἂν τοῦ κυρίου λέγοιτο), not as respects the peculiarity of form (μορφῆς ἰδιότητα), but the symbol of power (κατὰ τὸ τῆς δυνάμεως σύμβολον) and similarity of preaching."[773]

Hence in action the Gnostic becomes a living parable of the divine mysteries.

It seems that only Christ himself can be a real, essential likeness to God, and that human beings can only in a vague or indirect sense derive this likeness from God when Christ rules in the mind of the believer. The likeness is never ontological or essential, it seems, but has to do with the actions of the Gnostic, when these are directed by Christ.

Following God is a matter of living in accordance with the Word: "[...]as is the Word, such also must the believer's life be (ὁ βίος εἶναι τῷ πιστῷ προσήκει), so as to be able to follow (ἕπεσθαι) God, who brings all tings to end from the beginning by the right course."[774]

In the second book of the *Stromata* Clement explains, that God has commanded us to follow him, and that following should be understood as "assimilation (ἐξομοίωσιν)" to God.[775] Assimilation to God is "participation in moral excellence (οἰκειότητος ἀρετῆς)".[776] The image of God is the man who at once does and (thereby) receives good as "the pilot at once saves, and is saved (σῴζει καὶ σῴζεται)".[777] Other places Clement defines Christ/the Logos as the image of God, and the soul of Man as the image of the image, but the point here is ethical, rather than ontological, so the divergence can be excused (or is he talking of Christ?).

At times Clement speaks not only of the Gnostic as the one who has attained likeness to God as far as possible, or is becoming God, but as one who have "already become God (ἤδη γενέσθαι θεόν)"[778].

As Osborn, Choufrine emphasizes that deification for Clement means nearness to God.[779] Choufrine also notes that the "significance of the notion of infinity in Clement's thought has not been so far perceived by any scholar."[780] Choufrine reads Clement's use of the term 'magnitude' in *Stromata* 5.12 as technically related to Clement's use of the term 'infinite' (ἄπειρον).[781] When Clement talks of

773*Str.* 7.9.52.3, p. 538
774*Str.* 7.16.100.3, p. 552
775*Str.* 2.19.100.4, p. 369
776*Paed.* 2.12.99.1, p. 235
777*Str.* 2.19.102.2, p. 370
778*Str.* 4.23.149.8, p. 437
779Choufrine 2002, p. 159; Osborn 1976, p. 66
780Choufrine 2002, p. 159
781Choufrine translates: "it is by virtue of its magnitude (megéthei) that it is ranked as the

“the magnitude of Christ”[782] he is talking of infinity in the Aristotelian sense, i.e. Christ is not ἄπειρον, at least not in the sense of which this property belongs to the Father.[783] This “magnitude” is what differentiates the Gnostic infinitely from God, while simultaneously being the infinite proximity that allows seeing the face of God.[784] This makes Choufrine conclude against Mortley that there is hardly any possibility that the human mind can come into direct ‘touch’ with God, which is also due to the fact that even the Gnostic is still in some way embodied corporeally.[785] Still, the “magnitude of Christ” holds “the possibility of unlimited advance towards a transcendent limit.” The end (τέλος) of this advancement is a limit (πέρας) which is not a part of this magnitude which is then in another (i.e. the Aristotelian) sense infinite.

> “[…]the true gnostic’s “un-ending” (ateleútêton) progress for Clement is an ap-proximation of the Son’s proximity to the Father, which alone is in-finite in the sense of ἄπειρον (un-limited) - the term, applied to God prior to Clement only by the pre-Socratics.”[786]

So far Choufrine’s exposition fits with what we have argued above, that Clement’s *proleptic* ideal is in many ways similar to the idea of *epektasis.* However, Choufrine argues that deification in Clement means deification in the most radical sense, where the Gnostic is made to participate fully in divinity. Hence, according to Choufrine, assimilation to God (becoming like God as far as possible) according to Clement is quite different from the traditional Platonic account:

> “[…]in Platonism prior to Clement, “assimilation” does not make one *closer* to God in any sense. God is there not as an end to pursue but rather a pattern (to parádeigma) to imitate (to follow, èpesthai).”[787]

Choufrine adds that “[t]he infinity of the deified humanity’s “nearness” to God is intrinsic to His Son, whose body the true gnostic enters by silent prayer.”[788]

We should, however, be careful about how we construe the idea of deification with Clement. Often times Clement seems to be closer to the Platonic idea, than what we might think from the above. Clement's Christian version of the Platonic idea of assimilation to God is not build around a blurring of the distinction between

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whole (tò holôn) and is {or: there is} (kaì ésti) that Father of the universe (tôn hólôn).”
782*Str.* 5.71.3
783Choufrine 2002, pp. 173-174
784Choufrine 2002, p. 182
785Mortley, 1976, p. 119
786Choufrine 2002, p. 160
787Choufrine 2002, p. 179
788Choufrine 2002, p. 160

Creator and creation. Far from it. As we have seen Clement often talks of moral perfection as a matter of following God. Moreover, we should not forget that Clement at times is quite clear about stating that nothing among created things can be a "representation of God (ἀπεικόνισμα τοῦ θεοῦ)"[789] (which is, of course, not very Platonic, but at least it bars us from having to high ideas of deification) and that "it is utterly impossible for any one to become perfect as God is"[790]. Remember also that Clement argues that no action or activity (ἐνέργεια) is a habit (ἕξις)."[791] We have argued that for Clement activity (ἐνέργεια) is to be distinguished from existence (οὐσία).[792] In the same way habits (having, possession, state: ἕξις) should be distinguished from activity, much like being (τὸ εἶναι) and becoming (τοῦ γίνεσθαι) should be distinguished, as cause from effect.[793] A similar distinction could be made between existence (οὐσία) and habit (ἕξις) on the one hand, and activity (ἐνέργεια) and following (ἕπεσθαι) on the other. Our claim is that there can be no positive imitation of God as a matter of being (such imitation is a matter of abstraction, and thus of a negatively defined likeness), but only in accordance with activity. Virtue produces good actions, but it is only, it seems, in actions that the Gnostic resemble Christ.

All this should, however, be perceived from the perspective of Clement's peculiar idea of faith as anticipation. In anticipation the Gnostic partakes of the future good, which lies ahead. This is how the radical distinction between Creator and creation is bridged, but always as a matter of becoming (in anticipation) rather than as a matter of being (this should become more clear below, where we will discuss whether Clement's ethics can be classed with our definition of *epektasis*). The result of such anticipation is activity (ἐνέργεια), actions in which the Gnostic resembles, becomes a "living image" (ἄγαλμα ἔμψυχον) and a symbol of the power (δυνάμεως σύμβολον) of God.[794]

Faith, "voluntary preconception", is "the assent of piety" and "the subject of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen".[795] When Clement says that faith is no mere human custom,[796] it could be interpreted as being somehow instilled in

789*Str.* 6.18.163, p. 519, modified.
790*Str.* 7.14, p. 549
791*Str.* 7.11.66.2, p. 541
792See above. Clement only says expressly that "sin is an activity (ἐνεργείᾳ), not an existence (οὐσίᾳ)". This does not mean, of course, that some activities cannot be existences/beings, but only that there is at least one form of activity that is not being. *Str.* 4.13.93.3, p. 426
793*Str.* 8.9, p. 566
794*Str.* 7.9.52.3, p. 538
795*Str.* 2.2
796*Str.* 2.6.30.1, p. 354

human beings. But we should also be aware that for Clement faith is choice, a matter of will, rather than of habit. Knowledge, virtue and so on are habitual things that are products of faith, but faith is itself a matter of will and action.

Faith as anticipation is, however, thoroughly tied up with a negative theology where the infinity of God is central (an infinity which is, however, derived from simplicity, at least ontologically). Faith is in this sense approximation to Christ's infinite proximity to the Father (Choufrine above), but a never in a final sense (never as a matter of being, but always as a matter of becoming).

If we are right in our claims above the "nearness" to God, this does not consist in an actual positive participation in or assimilation to God, but in a negative similarity consisting in simplicity. Nothing created can, according to Clement, represent God, but by abstraction the Gnostic can become like to God in not being similar to that which is not God. This makes faith possible, and thus the anticipation of the future good through which activity and thus likeness to God is produced. This is how we should understand deification in Clement.

Epektasis in Clement (time, eternity and proleptic ethics)

Below we will discuss how Clement's proleptic epistemology (the idea of faith as anticipation) relates to his ethics. This should give us some idea of how we should conceive the possibility of knowing the good in relation to practice and concrete circumstances in time (and space). Before going on to this it will be useful to make some observations on his conception of time and eternity, and the relation between the two. This is relevant for understanding how the Gnostic (in time) relates to the Father through faith (in eternity).

About eternity and time, Clement writes that:

> "Eternity (αἰὼν), for instance, presents in an instant (συνίστησι) the future and the present, also the past of time. But truth, much more powerful than limitless duration (τοῦ αἰῶνος), can collect its proper germs, though they have fallen on foreign soil."[797]

Does Clement in this passage define eternity as "limitless duration", the sum of past, present and future? Clement distinguishes truth (in this passage identical to Christ himself) and eternity. Truth transcends time, which is arguably why both Hellenic and barbarian, as well as Jewish, sources can contain elements of truth.

In the *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Clement says that:

> "[…]to the end the to-day and the instruction continue; and then the true to-

797*Str.* 1.13.57.4, p. 313

> day, the never-ending day of God, extends over eternity (ἡ ἀνελλιπὴς τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμέρα τοῖς αἰῶσι συνεκτείνεται). Let us then ever obey the voice of the divine word. For the to-day signifies eternity (ἡ σήμερον γὰρ ἀίδιος· αἰώνων ἐστὶν εἰκών). And day is the symbol of light; and the light of men is the Word, by whom we behold God."[798]

To sum up, 'the true to-day' is 'the never-ending day of God', which is 'eternity' (or co-extensive with eternity), which is 'symbol of light', which is 'the Word'.[799] Thus the "never-ending day" specifies a 'moment' outside time, an eternal moment that is in some way represented in every moment in time.

Now this is hardly a 'theory' of the relation between time and eternity and similar matters. Rather, this is a good example of Clement's method of concealment in action.

The "light of truth" is "the Spirit of God indivisibly divided (ἀμερῶς μεριζόμενον) to all, who are sanctified by faith".[800] This is of course a paradoxical formula, but it should probably be understood in relation to Clement's theory of the Son as "neither simply one as one thing, nor many things as parts, but one thing as all things"[801], as discussed above. As the Son is the boundary between unity and plurality (creation), the Son must also be the boundary between time and eternity. Eternity has to do with the Son's relation to the Father, while time has to do with the Son's relation to creation. Creation, however, does not take place in time: "[...]how could creation take place in time (ἐν χρόνῳ γένοιτο κτίσις), seeing time was born along with things which exist."[802] The "activity exerted by the Son (τὴν δι' υἱοῦ ἐνέργειαν)" is an "indefinite (ἀόριστον) and dateless (ἄχρονον) production."[803]

Clement notes that since in any nation God accepts everyone who fears him (as Peter says in Acts), "[t]he absence of respect of persons (ἀπροσωπόληπτον) in God is not then in time, but from eternity. Nor had His beneficence a beginning[...]".[804] Time means here from a specific point in time.

Clement says that "[...]knowledge or wisdom ought to be exercised up to the eternal and unchangeable (ἀίδιον καὶ ἀναλλοίωτον) habit (ἕξιν) of contemplation."[805] What does Clement mean by eternal (ἀίδιον) in this case? Eternity as 'ἀίδιον' means everlasting in time as distinguished from αἰώνιος.

798*Protr.* 9.84.6, p. 196
799Daniélou and Choufrine notes the dependence on Philo in this, who identifies the seventh day of creation with the "noetic light". Philo, *Fragmenta* 224 n.123
800*Str.* 6.16.138.2, p. 512
801*Str.* 4.25.156, p. 438
802*Str.* 6.16.142.4, p. 513
803*Str.* 6.16.145.5, p. 514
804*Str.* 6.8.64.1
805*Str.* 6.7.61.3, p. 494

Hence Clement talks of an habit (ἕξις) that unfolds in time.

When the soul of the Gnostic improves in its acquisition of virtue, it, so to speak, revolves around God (a well known theme in later Platonism). These revolutions are distinguished by "[...]times (χρόνοις), and places (τόποις), and honours, and cognitions (γνώσεσι)", etc., all "[...]according to the particular (καθ' ἑκάστην ἑκάστη) order of each change". Their final aim is the "transcendent (ἐπαναβεβηκυίας) and continual (προσεχοῦς) contemplation of the Lord in eternity (ἐν ἀιδιότητι)."[806]

What is relevant for us is how Clement understands this "transcendent and continual contemplation".

> "[...]the exertion of the intellect by exercise is prolonged to a perpetual exertion (νοεῖν ἐκ συνασκήσεως εἰς τὸ ἀεὶ νοεῖν ἐκτείνεται). And the perpetual exertion of the intellect is the essence of an intelligent being, which results from an uninterrupted proces (ἀδιάστατον γενομένη) of admixture (ἀνάκρασιν), and remains eternal contemplation, a living substance (ζῶσα ὑπόστασις)."[807]

Do we in Clement have something akin to the later idea of *epektasis,* constant and infinite progress in virtue? Something which we might call *proleptic* ethics, with reference to his epistemology of faith?

As we have discussed above, central in Clement's thinking on temporality is his notions on anticipation. God's wish to bestow grace ensues the perfecting of His grace ("πεπληρῶσθαι τὴν χάριν"), says Clement, since "[...]the future of time is anticipated by the power of His volition (τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ θελήματος προλαμβάνεται)." Hence salvation is made actual through following of Christ:

> "We then alone, who first have touched the confines of life (τῶν ὅρων τῆς ζωῆς), are already perfect; and we already live who are separated from death. Salvation, accordingly, is the following of Christ (ἕπεσθαι Χριστῷ)."[808]

In other words, to follow Christ is to anticipate the future perfection, just as faith is voluntary anticipation. If imitation and assimilation to God is to follow Christ, then all these things tend to be more or less synonymous, it seems.

Mortley argues that for Clement the true Gnostic "[...]is characterized by the present tense, and never the future: it is never said the he *will* obtain knowledge, peace, righteousness or heavenly rewards; he has them now."[809] But is this true? It

806*Str.* 7.2.10.2, p. 526
807*Str.* 4.22.136.4, p. 434
808*Paed.* 1.6.26.3, p. 216
809Mortley 1986, p. 40

is, in the sense that the Gnostic has “already become God”.[810] In the sixth book of the Stromata Clement notes that “[...]he who by love is already in the midst of that in which is destined to be (ὃ δ' ἐνοῖς ἔσται, δι' ἀγάπης ἤδη γενόμενος), and has anticipated hope by knowledge (λπίδα προειληφὼς διὰ τῆς γνώσεως), does not desire anything, having, as far as possible the very thing desired.”[811] A range of themes are knit together in this passage. Knowledge presupposes faith which in turn is preconception, *prolepsis*. Another aspect of the passage is the “as far as possible (ὡς οἷόν)” which easily alludes to the Platonic idea of 'likeness to God as far as possible'.

Clement uses the term ‘predestination’ almost synonymously with ‘anticipation’, at least in the sixth book of the *Stromata* where he writes that the Gnostic has “predestinated (προορίσας) himself by reason of what he knew and whom he loved”.[812] Through love, “the future is for him already present (κἄστιν αὐτῷ δι' ἀγάπην ἐνεστὸς ἤδη)”, so the Gnostic has “firmly laid hold of the end of the promise by knowledge (ἐπαγγειλαμένου κατ' ἐπιστήμην βεβαίως ἀπείληφεν).”[813] The Gnostic rejoices on account of the things promised by anticipation (φθάσας), “as if they were already present (ὡς ἤδη παροῦσιν)”.[814] This theme can also be understood in terms of hope: The Gnostic loves “the things hoped for, or rather already known (μᾶλλον δὲ τὰ ἐγνωσμένα ἤδη), being hoped for so as to be apprehended (εἰς κατάληψιν δὲ ἐλπιζόμενα).”[815] Hence hope, anticipation, predestination and *prolepsis* are aspects of the same thing.

Anticipation also plays a role in an interesting passage from *The Instructor*, where Clement discusses the relationship between time and eternity:

> “[...]the end is reserved till the resurrection of those who believe; and it is not the reception of some other thing (ἄλλου τινός), but the obtaining of the promise previously made (προωμολογημένης). For we do not say that both take place together at the same time – both the arrival at the end (πρὸς τὸ πέρας ἄφιξιν), and the anticipation of that arrival (τῆς ἀφίξεως τὴν πρόληψιν). For eternity and time are not the same, neither is the attempt and the final result (οὐδὲ μὴν ὁρμὴ καὶ τέλος); but both have reference to the same thing, and one and the same person (ἄμφω καὶ περὶ ἄμφω) is concerned in both. Faith, so to speak, is the attempt generated in time (ἐν χρόνῳ γεννωμένη); the final result is the attainment of the promise (τέλος

810 *Str.* 4.24, p. 437
811 *Str.* 6.9.73.4, p. 497
812 *Str.* 6.9.76.4, p. 497
813 *Str.* 6.9.77.2, p. 497
814 *Str.* 7.7.47.5, p. 536. Notice that Clement here uses φθάσας for anticipation, not πρόληψις or similar epistemological concepts.
815 *Str.* 7.11.63.1, p. 541

δὲ τὸ τυχεῖν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας)[...]”[816]

Where faith, there is the promise. The consummation of the promise, knowledge, is rest (“τελείωσις δὲ ἐπαγγελίας ἡ ἀνάπαυσις”), which is the final object of aspiration (“ὃ δὴ ἔσχατον νοεῖται ὀρεκτόν”).[817]

In a puzzling statement (with allusion to Paul?) Clement says that: “Thou shalt be what thou dost not hope, and canst not conjecture (ἔσῃ γὰρ οἷος οὐκ ἐλπίζεις οὐδ' εἰκάσαι δύναιο ἄν).”[818] There is an ‘*apophatic*’ feel to this. But it is not impossible that these words are directed at the ‘ordinary’ believer, since the Gnostic is, through anticipation, already that which he hopes for. As there are stages of perfection, Clement notices that the ordinary believer is “not yet also righteous (οὐδέπω καὶ δίκαιος)”[819] in the sense of “the righteousness of progress and perfection (τὴν κατὰ προκοπὴν καὶ τελείωσιν δικαιοσύνην), according to which the Gnostic is called righteous.”[820] So what characterizes the Gnostic is “the righteousness of progress”. Does this mean that righteousness is an ongoing process, a development taking place? Clement says that:

> “[...]our Gnostic possesses all good things, as far as possible; but not likewise in number; since otherwise he would be incapable of changing his place (ἀμετάθετος) through the due inspired stages of advancement and acts of administration.”[821]

Hence we see that stability, impassibility and similar ideas of virtue does not mean that the Gnostic cannot change.

Knowledge “[...]leads us to the endless and perfect end (τέλος ἄγει τὸ ἀτελεύτητον καὶ τέλειον), teaching us beforehand (προδιδάσκουσα) the future life that we shall lead[...]”[822]. That the end itself is endless sounds very much like the notions of infinite progress in virtue (*epektasis*), derived from Phil 3:13, by Gregory of Nyssa and Origen. With a reference to Phil 3:13, Clement notes that Paul reckons himself perfect because “he has been emancipated from his former life, and strives after the better life, not as perfect in knowledge, but as aspiring after perfection (τοῦ τελείου ἐφιέμενος).”[823] Clement also notes that “the perfect man”

816*Paed.* 1.6.28.3, p. 216
817*Paed.* 1.6.29.3, p. 216
818*Paed.* 2.12.99.1, p. 235
819*Str.* 6.12.102.5
820*Str.* 6.12.102.5, p. 504
821*Str.* 6.6, p. 536
822*Str.* 7.10.56.2, p. 539
823*Paed.* 1.6.52.3. All this should of course be distinguished from the “vicious insatiableness (ἀπληστίαν ἄδικον)” (passions), that leads to a “depraved state (καχεξίᾳ)”. Str. 7.2.9.4, p. 525

devotes himself to “the pure vision of insatiable contemplation.”[824] And as quoted above, the Gnostic “having become son and friend, he is now replenished with insatiable contemplation face to face.”[825]

But the passage in Clement that most resembles our definition of *epektasis* is when he argues that the soul of the Gnostic “is ever improving in the acquisition of virtue and the increase of righteousness (πάλιν τε αὖ τὴν βελτιουμένην ἑκάστοτε ψυχὴν εἰς ἀρετῆς ἐπίγνωσιν καὶ δικαιοσύνης αὔξησι)”.[826] In each step the soul advances “towards the habit of impassibility (εἰς ἕξιν ἀπαθείας)”[827]. In other passages, however, it seems that there is an end to perfection:

> “If the Word, who is Judge, call; he, having grown inflexible (ἀκλινὴς γενόμενος), and not indulging a whit the passions, walks unswervingly where justice advises him to go; being very well persuaded that all things are managed consummately well, and that progress to what is better (εἰς τὸ ἄμεινον ἀεὶ τὴν προκοπὴν προϊέναι) goes on in the case of souls that have chosen virtue, till they come to the Good itself, to the Father’s vestibule, so to speak, close to the great High Priest.”[828]

It is not only because of a *proleptic* capability of the soul that it can reach out towards God in faith. If this is the subjective aspect of faith, there is also an objective aspect. He who obeys the call for the right reasons “is on his way to knowledge (ἐπὶ τὴν γνῶσιν ἴεται)”[829], being “drawn by the love of Him who is the true object of love”. Also “the attachment to intellectual objects naturally becomes to the Gnostic an influence which draws away from the objects of sense”.[830] There is, of course, an obviously ‘erotic’ ring to this. Objectivity is important. It is not just faith that makes *prolepsis* what it is, but also the character of God himself.

For now it is sufficient to note that Clement's point is that perfect insight is not possible in this life, but that the anticipation of perfection in itself is a form of perfection.

The possibility of moral epistemology

We will now discuss how moral epistemology should be conceived in Clement, i.e. how can we reflect on moral truths? How can we describe the true Gnostic? How does the Gnostic learn what is virtuous, right and good?

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824 *Str.* 6.13, p. 505
825 *Str.* 5.6, p. 454
826 *Str.* 7.2.10.1
827 *Str.* 7.2.10.1, p. 525
828 *Str.* 7.7.45.3
829 *Str.* 4.22.145.2, p. 436
830 *Str.* 4.24, p. 436

At times we find traces of something that could be called an ethics of invisibility. Granted that Clement's ethics is first of all '*aphairetic*', this invisibility is derived from the unity brought about by the method of abstraction. Simplicity, as we have seen in the case of God, is incomprehensible, and as such the simple person is invisible.

Above we have asked whether imitation of the image and likeness of God, shows in the body also, or only in the mind. Clement's answer seems to be that while vice shows, virtue does not show in the body in any obvious way. This invisibility is not derived directly from the invisibility of God. Rather the invisibility of virtue in the body of the Gnostic rises from constancy, the habitual doing of good. Such constancy also makes the Gnostic invisible to himself, so to speak: With reference to the sermon on the mount Clement notes that "[n]ot even he himself who shows mercy ought to know (γινώσκειν) that he does show mercy; for in this way he will be sometimes merciful, sometimes not."[831]

Clement does not consider obvious, outward signs of virtue as having much significance. Maybe, what he is saying is that if there is such a significance in one instance, it only exists relative to the lack of significance that a person might have in other instances, when virtue is not habitual? Then the point seems to be, that only if good acts are something extraordinary for a person, does it show. But good acts should not be something 'extraordinary' but a habitual, natural character of the good person. Hence virtue does not show. This does not mean that the Gnostic's body is not sanctified as well as the soul.[832] The Gnostic occupies himself with God, logically as well as morally and physically.

It also turns out that 'invisibility' is not the whole part of the story. Imitating God (also) means teaching others to imitate God (just as Christ has instructed the Gnostic):

> "The Gnostic even forms and creates (κτίζει καὶ δημιουργεῖ) himself; and besides also, he, like to God (ἐξομοιούμενος θεῷ), adorns those who hear him; assimilating as far as possible the moderation which, arising from practice, tends to impassibility, to Him who by nature possesses impassibility;"[833]

Such work can hardly be completely 'invisible'. As Clement notes in the introduction to the *Stromata*, "Wisdom is a communicative and philantropic thing

831*Str.* 4.22.138.2, p. 435
832*Str.* 4.26, p. 439
833*Str.* 7.3.13.3

(κοινωνικὸν δὲ ἡ σοφία καὶ φιλάνθρωπο)”.[834] Hence the martyr plays a special role in the fourth book of the *Stromata*. Martyrdom is perfection (at least a kind of perfection), “not because the man comes to the end (τέλος) of his life”, but “because he has exhibited the perfect work of love (τέλειον ἔργον ἀγάπης ἐνεδείξατο).”[835] By witnessing (and by teaching others) the Gnostic follows Christ. On the other hand, martyrdom is to be understood broadly, as the confession of God. Every soul that has “lived purely in the knowledge of God” and obeyed that commandments is a witness by “[...]life and word (βίῳ καὶ λόγῳ), in whatever way it may be released from the body[...]”[836].

If there is any form of paradoxical character to the life of the Gnostic, then it must be between the invisibility that arises from constancy on the one hand, and the visibility that arises from witnessing on the other. The *Stromata* can itself be conceived as an example of witnessing.

But how does the Gnostic himself know what actions are right? For Clement knowledge of God and right action is inseparable:

> “All the action, then, of a man possessed of knowledge is right action; and that done by a man not possessed of knowledge is wrong action, though he observe a plan[...]”[837]

Hence knowing moral principles does not lead to right action in itself. Only the knowledge of God through anticipatory faith can produce such action. Works, says Clement “follow knowledge, as the shadow the body.”[838] In this action the Gnostic is ‘like’ to Christ, in that his actions are similar to Christ’s.

Clement says about virtue that, “all that is characterized by virtue proceeds from virtue and leads back to virtue (ἀπ' ἀρετῆς τέ ἐστι καὶ πρὸς ἀρετὴν ἀναφέρεται).”[839] Knowing God is just as much about being “known of Him (γνωσθείς τε πρὸς αὐτοῦ)”.[840]

Conclusion

The *Stromata*, much rather than being the promised work of systematic philosophy, is a “memoranda (ὑπομνήματα)”, “stored up against old age, as a remedy against forgetfulness”.[841] Rather than being a philosophical ‘system’,

834*Str.* 1.1.1.3
835*Str.* 4.4.14.4, p. 411
836*Str.* 4.4.15.3, p. 412
837*Str.* 8.10, p. 540
838*Str.* 7.13, p. 547
839*Str.* 6.17.158.4, p. 517
840*Str.* 7.13.82.7, p. 547
841*Str.* 1.1.11.1, p. 301

Clement's thinking is a *theologia viatorum*. This seems to follow from the fact that only a negative theology is possible, a fact that must influence ethics and moral epistemology as well.

Between Clement's negative theology and his anthropology is a layer of logos-Christology, which makes his negative theology somewhat inapparent in his ethics. In other Patristic authors we often see ethics with a 'negative side', where negative theologies play a role, and a 'positive side' where imitation of Christ plays a role (e.g. the Epistle to Diognetus and Gregory of Nyssa). This distinction cannot be made easily in Clement. If there are two sides in Clement they rather consist in imitation of the unity of Christ as the Logos on the one hand, and imitation of the concrete actions of Christ as Jesus on the other. In the former a certain 'negativity' does plays a role, though, especially in the form of abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις), so that Clement's ethics can be said to be to a large degree '*aphairetic*'. In Clement this ethics easily combines with a more traditional 'ethics of invisibility' (similar to that in the *Epistle to Diognetus*).

Clement links being with cause and becoming with effect, in a way where habits and actions are being, and becoming, respectively. Virtue is a cause that produces actions as its effect. The Gnostic has reached a fixed habit of well-doing, but it is the well-doing that makes him similar to God. Now, if the Gnostic is only like to God in action, and not in form, it is only in becoming, not in being, that the Gnostic can be like to God. The Gnostic is always becoming, but never is, like to God, it seems.

The doing of good works is the product of faith, the voluntary anticipation through which the Gnostic receives future perfection now. Virtue produces good actions, but it is only in actions that the Gnostic resemble Christ. If likeness to God (the Gnostic being an image of Christ, the express image of the Father) is not a likeness in being but in following, and action, is not this equivalent to saying that the Gnostic does not represent God in any 'adequate' way, but only in a 'true' way?[842] Does this not mean that moral knowledge can be true, but never adequate?

842As we have defined truth and adequacy above.

Part IV. Gregory of Nyssa

> *"[W]hosoever searches the whole of Revelation will find therein no doctrine of the Divine nature, nor indeed of anything else that has a substantial existence, so that we pass our lives in ignorance of much, being ignorant first of all of ourselves, as men, and then of all things besides. For who is there who has arrived at a comprehension of his own soul?"* (Gregory of Nyssa, *Answer to Eunomius' Second Book*, p. 261)

Introduction

Along with his older brother Basil the Great and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus, another bishop, Gregory of Nyssa is known as one of the Cappadocian fathers. Gregory was born c. 335 in Cæsarea, the capital of Cappadocia, into a wealthy Christian family, where he received his theological and philosophical training, according to himself, from his brother Basil and his sister Macrina.[843] Though quite unwilling, he was appointed bishop in the small diocese of Nyssa by Basil in 372. However, already in 374 he was exiled under emperor Valens, who favored Arian theology. In 378, when Theodosius I became emperor, Gregory was allowed to return to his see and in 381 he was present at the second ecumenical council, in Constantinople. Here he successfully defended the orthodox Nicene view on the trinity against Neo-Arianism, as represented by the Anomœan Eunomius of Cyzicus (d. c. 393) who had argued that the Son was of a different nature (οὐσία) from the Father. The twelve books against Eunomius, and the *Answer to Eunomius' Second Book* (central to the present argument) was an outcome of this conflict. Gregory drew on a wide range of philosophical sources: Platonism, Philo of Alexandria, Origen, not least.[844] There are similarities with Clement of Alexandria, but where Clement had emphasized the epistemological side of Christ's saving work, Gregory notes emphasized ontology: "[...]the Lord does not say that knowing something about God is blessed, but to possess God in oneself"[845], and where Clement's negative theology is primarily a matter of abstraction it is in Gregory more thoroughly *apophatic*.

Much interesting work have been done on Gregory of Nyssa's polemical use of notions of divine infinity, language and negative theology.[846] But something still needs to be said about how these strategies influenced the development of

843*VitMac.*
844Daniélou 1967, *pp. 333-345*
845*Beat.* 142
846E.g. Heine 1975

Gregory's more systematic or speculative thought, not least when it comes to his mature views on anthropology and the possibility of ethics.

An obvious place to start if trying to get a hold on the developments in Gregory's ethics and anthropology is by making a comparison of the early treatise *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* and the late *On the Life of Moses* (especially the second book). *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* was probably written around 377, while *On the Life of Moses* was probably written much later, in the 390s.[847] Both discusses themes of spiritual growth and anthropology, and both contains allegorical readings of Moses' life. Ronald Heine has argued that the changes from the one to the other are not of a radical kind, but a mater of change of emphasis, stemming from the theological controversies engaged in by Gregory.[848] While this might be true the apparently subtle changes might prove to be more deep-seated in the developments in Gregory's epistemological and theological views than one might initially think.

Gregory's early works are mostly on ethical or ascetic themes, and of a non-polemical character. But we do get a sense of the negative theological dialectic, which arguably breaks out in his later works. The fight against Neo-Arianism/Anomeanism was central for this to take place. In 383 he was present at the synod in Constantinople. From 382-384, Gregory wrote the books of *Against Eunomius* and the *Answer to Eunomius' Second Book.*[849] Against Eunomius, Gregory held that God's essence is infinite (ἄπειρον), in a radical sense, and thus completely ineffable. This he combines with the idea that language works conceptually, and that talk about the divinity is possible in spite of His infinity: Language is always imprecise, but terms can be invented by human beings in order to say either something about God's ἐνέργεια or something in negative definitions about God's οὐσία.

In Gregory's mature works, these developments seems to have influenced his ethics. Gregory now not only defines evil as privation, but often the good, and virtue is defined simply as the negation of evil and vice, i.e., the negation of a specific privation.[850] As such the term 'virtue' becomes an indirect, negative conception, meaningless in itself, but dialectically pointing beyond itself to the ineffable good. The following especially focuses on how these dialectics can be observed in Gregory's interpretations of Moses' three theophanies.

The point is not that Gregory was not aware of (some of) the implications of

847Ferguson 1978, p. 1
848Heine 1995, p. 2
849*ConEunI.* 1-12; *ConEunII.*
850*ConEunII.* 146; *DeAnRes.*, p. 436; *Cant.* 374, p. 395

negative theology in his early works. At Gregory's time this tradition was already well developed. But the polemics against Eunomianism helped him to purify his notions on ethics, as well as made him rethink what was increasingly revealed to be inherent contradictions in his early anthropology (for example that Man is a microcosm, and created in the image of God).

Based on a study of Gregory of Nyssa, according to Guilio Maspero the elements constituting “a system that is to be called apophatic” are “(1) the division between created and uncreated, (2) the theory of language, (3) the οὐσία-ἐνέργεια distinction and (4) the argument concerning the goodness and power of God”.[851] We shall see how each point can be treated, though we will not use the term '*apophatic*' as a general description of Gregory's thought. This term will be used more narrowly, since great portions of Gregory's negative theology and ethics could also be described as '*aphairetic*' (especially his early works).

If we look at the ethical consequences of the developments in Gregory's negative theology and anthropology, the above does not mean that some sort of 'negative' ethics is the only option in Gregory. This is due to the fact that, in Gregory, negative theology primarily has to do with being: Negative theology only relates to essence or nature (οὐσία, φύσις) and not activities (ἐνέργεια) or relations (and it is distinctions such as these which can be used to clear up the apparent contradictions in Gregory's anthropology). Hence as negative theology results in a parallel negative anthropology, it is only in essence that the human soul cannot be described in positive terms. And as God can be positively described in his activities, human beings can be described positively as they relate to a context. Notions of virtue, right and wrong must reflect this two-foldedness. It is our claim that Gregory's theory of language, as developed during the Eunomian controversies, can also be applied to a range of ethical subjects. This is not least the case for his theory of *epektasis*[852], his idea of following, and his notion of spiritual freedom. Lastly we will discuss how Gregory's negative theology influences his social ethics, his famous attack on slavery in particular. Our claim is that just as negative theology is central in his defense of trinitarianism, the negative anthropology derived from it is central for his idea of human relations. Because of the idea of humankind as made in the image of God, splitting humankind into positive categories (e.g. slave and master) is indirectly an attack on the Judeo-Christian distinction and the negative theology derived from it.

851BDG, “Apophatic theology”, p. 73

852Gregory rarely uses precisely this term, but the idea is obviously present in much of his thinking. Hence we will use this as a generic term for constant progress in virtue.

Gregory's early ethics (up to the Eunomian controversies)

Throughout the treatment of Gregory's works we will use a simplified distinction between his early works and his mature works. By Gregory's early works will be meant everything up to the controversies against Eunomius. The philosophy of language developed in these controversies was arguably important for Gregory's mature works, though it might not have been the only reason that Gregory's thinking developed. The perspective on Gregory's thinking in the following is, however, highly focused on the developments in his view on language and epistemology. Hence for the present purpose the distinction between early and mature works, with the Eunomian controversies at the border, is arguably useful. In the following we will discuss first Gregory's basic ideas in the early treatise *On Virginity.* Secondly we will discuss his treatise *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms.* The latter will especially focus on Gregory's allegorical treatment on Moses' theophanies, since this makes us able to compare Gregory's early ethics with has later, as developed in *On the Life of Moses.*

On Virginity

Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity* may be his first treatise (ca. 368).[853] In it Gregory uses 'virginity' (παρθενίᾳ) as the approach to the life of virtue and Christian perfection. Gregory describes 'virginity' as a representation of a future blessedness:

> "In fact, the Life of Virginity (ὁ ἐν παρθενίᾳ βίος) seems to be an actual representation (εἰκών) of the blessedness in the world to come (ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι αἰῶνι), showing as it does in itself so many signs (φέρων) of the presence of those expected (ἐλπίδος) blessings which are reserved (ἀποκειμένων) for us there."[854]

Hence there is a certain reminiscence of Heb 11:1, where "faith is assurance of things hoped (ἐλπιζομένων) for, a conviction of things not seen"[855]. Virginity stands in an anticipatory relationship to the 'invisible'. As such it is quite incapable of being described, Gregory notes. The only sufficient way of praising virginity is to show that it is above praise, and praise it "[...]by our lives rather than by our words."[856]

Some degree of anti-propositionalism[857] is a part of Gregory's philosophical

853BDG, "De virginitate", p. 774
854*DeVir.* 14.4, p. 360
855Hebrews 11:1, ASV
856*DeVir.* 1.1, p. 344
857Talbot Brewer defines moral philosophical propositionalism as the belief that moral

repertoire from early on. Anyone who entrusts language the ability to speak of the ineffable beauty is, with the words of David, a liar.[858] The reasons for this are not obvious though, since Gregory only marginally touches more fundamental ontological and epistemological issues in the treatise (at least of the kind that would be relevant). One possible perspective is this: As has often been noted Gregory seems to believe that the life of virginity is not possible for himself. This is amongst the arguments that Gregory was married. In the treatise this statement is used as a rhetorical strategy: Gregory's treatment is done from the perspective of an outsider, which simultaneously allows him to side with the listeners while exalting 'virginity' indefinitely (since it cannot be reduced to any definite descriptions). It is not impossible, however, that there are more principled reasons for seeing virginity as being above praise. If human beings are made in the image (εἰκόνα)[859] of God and can be an imitation (μίμησις)[860] of the future good, then it is not implausible that some sort of negative theology spills over into his moral epistemology.

Likeness to God is a gift of God received at creation, whereas sin is as an "operative darkness (σκότους ἐνεργειαν)"[861]. The likeness to God is regained as this activity is stopped. The soul "will grasp the object of its search as a natural consequence of rejecting the opposite attractions"[862], but this only happens after the soul has been purified and has attained "the high and heavenly realities".[863] The opposite of darkness is necessarily light.

Human efforts can only achieve to make the divine likeness shine forth once again. Virginity is a "fellow-worker (συνεργόν)" and "practical method (τέχναι)" aiming at creating a "complete forgetfulness of natural emotions" in the soul, by means of moderation.[864] The divine books, Gregory notes, are full of instructions revealing "a process (μέθοδον) by which we may be actually guided" to "the only absolute, and primal, and unrivalled Beauty and Goodness."[865] There is a certain element of theosemiosis[866] in *On Virginity*. The beauty in nature – "the beauty of

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truths and intentions can be definitely captured in propositional descriptions. According to Brewer Gregory of Nyssa's view is not propositionalistic. Brewer 2009, p. 37

858 *DeVir.* 10.2, p. 355

859 *DeVir.* 12.2, p. 357

860 *DeVir.* 4.8, p. 351

861 *DeVir.* 12.2, p. 357

862 *DeVir.* 18.4, p. 364

863 Ibid. Likewise Gregory notes that "the man whose thoughts are fixed upon the invisible is necessarily separated from all the ordinary events of life" (i.e. not the other way round). *DeVir.* 4.8, p. 351

864 *DeVir.* 4.9, p. 351

865 *DeVir.* 11.6-12.1, p. 357

866 See above.

the heavens, and of the dazzling sunbeams”[867] – acts as “the hand to lead us to the love of the supernal Beauty”, Gregory notes. Due to the weakness of the human mind, it must be led “[...]towards the invisible by stages through the cognizances of the senses.”[868] Natural theology as a preparation for seeing “the beauty of the true and intellectual light” is prevalent throughout Gregory's works. In *On Virginity* the intellectual movement from creation to the Creator is best described as one of discrete continuity*, i.e.* a non-broken 'ascension' not involving any necessary negation(s), if any.[869]

Gregory criticizes ethical rigorism,[870] which by overdoing asceticism is still (as hedonism) concerned with the flesh rather than the “peaceful action of the soul's functions.”[871] This result is the loss of the “heavenly liberty (ἐλευθερία)”[872]. Hence Gregory defends a doctrine of temperance where anti-propositionalism and a more rule-bound ethics are balanced.[873]

On the possibility of theorizing virginity, Gregory writes that:

> “Any theory divorced from practice (τῶν ἔργων), however admirably it may be dressed out, is like the unbreathing statue, with its show of a blooming complexion impressed in tints and colours; but the man who acts as well as teaches, as the Gospel tells us, he is the man who is truly living, and has the bloom of beauty, and is efficient and stirring.”[874]

Instruction in the virtuous life style must happen through “actual practice” (“διὰ τῶν ἔργων διδάσκεσθαι”).[875] Ethical principles cannot be formulated without reference to actual instances of morally good persons. We shall return to this theme later. By now we shall simply note the double thematic of ethical anti-propositionalism on the one hand and some sort of ethical 'methodism' on the other, and the tension which is inherent herein.

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867 *DeVir.* 11.3, p. 356, modified

868 *DeVir.* 11.1, p. 355. What follows might sound akin to Diotima’s so-called *scala amoris* in Plato's *Symposion*, but Gregory lets us have no doubt that “[t]he Beauty which is invisible and formless” can never be illustrated by language or grasped by the mind.

869 I.e. negation is only a relative matter of freeing the soul from material things. This continuity does not preclude the notion that spiritual progress happens in steps (=discretion).

870 *DeVir.* 22.1, p. 367. Gregory talks of people who unconsciously “laboriously thwart their own design” by sliding “into the very opposite kind of excess”. Hence these are probably not just, e.g., Montanists or others who dogmatically embrace rigorism.

871 *DeVir.* 22.2, p. 368

872 *DeVir.* 22.1, p. 368, modified

873 *DeVir.* 22.2, p. 368

874 *DeVir.*, p. 368, modified.

875 *DeVir.* 23.1

On the Inscriptions of the Psalms

An analogy to this dual description of morality can be found in *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms.* The "purpose (τέλος)" of the virtuous life is beatitude ("μακαριότης"), Gregory notes in the first chapter of this commentary.[876] Indeed, all hard labor (σπουδὴν) relates to some standard (ἀναφοράν). While this of course expresses a common teleological view on the virtues, Gregory's statements more specifically seem to resemble an (ethical) equivalent to the hermeneutical method of Iamblichus (c. 242-327 AD).[877] This methodology sought after the aim (σκοπός) of the text in terms of intentionality, and in accordance with this Gregory notes that "[f]irst, one must understand the aim (σκοπός)" to which the writing looks. In the present context Gregory uses the terms σκοπός and τέλος more or less interchangeably. In a similar manner he speaks interchangeably of the aim (σκοπός/τέλος) of the virtues and that of the inscriptions. This conflation could reasonably be considered as Gregory's methodological basis in the commentary on the inscriptions.[878]

The definition of beatitude is the traditional Platonic idea of likeness to God (τὸ θεῖον ὁμοίωσις).[879] Hence, since the purpose of the virtuous life is beatitude, then the purpose of the virtues is in the end likeness to God. According to Gregory, the inscriptions teaches that this is managed in three stages, namely 1) separation from evil, 2) the meditation on sublime things, and 3) finally the actual likeness to God.[880] In accordance with this, Gregory argues, the inscriptions teaches a "subtle" teaching intended to direct the hearer to the virtuous way of life by certain "suggestions and bits of advice" (ὑποθήκαις τισιν καὶ συμβουλαῖς).[881] Hence Gregory does not promise a grand theory of ethics. He moreover expresses a healthy anti-positivism (or anti-empiricism) when he complains that "the majority define the good in terms of phenomena when they say that that alone is good which one might demonstrate to sense-perception."[882] But though virtue is hidden to immediate sense-perception, "one can find virtue separated from evil by obvious indications (φανεροῖς σημείοις)"[883]. This means that the difference between virtue

876*InIns.* 25. Where other fathers, e.g. Origen had commented on the psalms themselves, Gregory's comment is specifically on the inscriptions, i.e. the added headings of the Psalter, containing instructions on music, the author and historical circumstances.
877Heine 1995, pp. 34-36
878*InIns.* 24; *InIns.* 29
879*InIns.* 26
880*InIns.* 26. This three-stage notion of the virtuous life has been proposed as a basic key to Gregory's spiritual teachings (e.g. Danielou 1944). But as we shall see, Gregory's view becomes much less rigid in his later works.
881*InIns.* 28
882*InIns.* 35
883*InIns.* 34

and evil is something 'distinct' (διαφοράν), the distinguishing (ἐγγινομένης) marks being types of joy (εὐφροσύνη). While virtue brings joy to the soul, evil brings joy to the physical senses. Pleasure, the joy of which disappears immediately and passes into non-existence, leaves traces of shame (αἰσχύνη). But not only can we talk about virtue and evil by means of positive indications. By noting that the goal of virtue is peace and rest etc., the author of the psalms points out that which is contrary to this by means of silence.[884] In other words, evil is described by means of negative definitions. This, of course, fits well with the (by Gregory's time) traditional definition of evil as some sort of privation (στέρησις which can be described through negation, ἀπόφασις), and as such as something that must be defined negatively in reference to what we know is good. Similarly, on the ethical level Gregory argues that "the acquisition of the good becomes the avoidance and destruction of its opposite."[885] Hence when the good is achieved, it seems, evil is automatically destroyed.

Again, this does not amount to full-blooded negative theology or negative definition of the good. Gregory does note that initially, spiritual progress ("entrance to the good") starts with "the departure from those things which are opposite to it" and that the "participation in what is superior occurs by means of this entrance."[886] But this does not seem to amount to an absolutely negative (not to say dialectical) definition of 'the good', since, as noted above, Gregory distinguishes between three levels of progress in the virtuous life. Of these, only the third, highest level consists in actual likeness to God, something which is not talked of in negative definitions. Moreover, as Heine notes, though Rondeau is wrong in claiming that Gregory does not assert the theme of "divine darkness" at all in *On the Inscriptions* (there is at least one reference to this)[887], this theme is never developed further, as, e.g., in *On the Life of Moses,* where Moses' contemplation in the "cloud of darkness" is identified with the peak of spiritual growth.[888] Rather Gregory talks in terms of "brightness" as when he notes that we are united with the divine when "the brightness of God" shines in our conduct.[889]

Hence, as in *On Virginity,* the statements in *On the Inscriptions* seem to place negative definitions of evil as secondary to positive definitions of the good (or virtue), though this happens in a somewhat metaphorical or allegorical form. This

884*InIns.* 37.
885*InIns.* 38.
886*InIns.* 39.
887Rondeau 1972, p. 517. Rondeau argues that the Gregory perceives five stages of spiritual development in the inscriptions.
888Heine 1995, pp. 53-54
889*InIns.* 51.

is at least the case when it comes to the higher levels of spiritual progress.

This is also the case with ethical concepts, such as virtue. Indeed, though being well aware that “virtue is above praise”, in the early works Gregory often prioritizes descriptions with positive definitions of virtue. For example, he takes psalm 4,7 to mean that “the face of God” can be contemplated in certain “imprints” (the virtues) in which the “divine form” is imprinted.[890] After coming down from the mountain, Moses “bore upon his face the tokens of the divine power which had been revealed to him”[891].

Gregory's description of Man as a miniature cosmos, containing all the elements of the universe, arguably reflects this semiotic.[892] The arrangement of the cosmos is like a polyphonic musical harmony, Gregory claims (in a basically Pythagorean manner), and the concord of creation with itself, composed of opposites in harmony, is a hymn to the inaccessible and inexpressible God.[893] The part of the whole is of the same kind as the whole in all respects,[894] and the constitution of the human body reflects the music in the universe, like a fragment of glass reflects the sun. Hence, the human body can be compared to a musical instrument reproducing the music of the universe.[895] This “music” presumably consists of what Gregory calls the “banquet of virtues”[896], the marks of which is the types of joy and shame noted above.

But not only does the harmony of the components of the individual human person produce such “music”. Gregory distinguishes between the virtues of speculative philosophy (which is unclear to the majority) and “the moral character of life (ἦθος τοῦ βίου)” (a Philonic distinction?) which is “zealously perfected at the same time by others”[897], by the “rhythmical order” of life made known publicly. When human nature is exalted to its original condition, it will produce “that sweet sound of thanksgiving through their meeting with one another”[898], which, more precisely, means that humanity, having been made “an instrument for God” will imitate “the harmony of the universe in the variety and diversity of the virtues.”[899] And when the author of the Psalms talks of a city,[900] he means “that orderly and

890*InIns.* 35. Such talk of the “divine form” seems quite contrary to Gregory's later explicitly apophatic theology.
891*InIns.* 44
892*InIns.* 30
893*InIns.* 31
894*InIns.* 32
895*InIns.* 32
896*InIns.* 34
897*InIns.* 76
898*InIns.* 66
899*InIns.* 66
900Ps. 58:7

well-arranged society which is joined together as a city by means of virtue".[901] Hence, for Gregory virtue has a social meaning, not only eschatologically (as the above might seem to imply), but also in regard to ethical guidance, in that the virtuous becomes able to lead others to virtue (see below on the example of Moses).

The definition of Man as a microcosm might seem to be contradicted by statements in other works, most clearly in *On the Making of Man,* where Gregory calls such a definition a mean and unworthy fancy of "some heathen writers".[902] On the other hand, in the passages where Gregory discusses the former position he often seems a bit reluctant to actually defend this as his own, thus making the apparent contradiction less brutal. At least in two instances, Gregory refers this theory to "wise men".[903] Perhaps this should be considered as a "rhetorical" strategy? At any rate, when defining Man as a microcosm in *On the Inscriptions,* Gregory writes that "man is a miniature cosmos", but he also adds that "this same man has also been made an image of the one who composed the cosmos".[904] Again, this duality is also exhibited in Gregory's description of the virtues as both a "musical" harmony reflecting the harmony of the universe on the one hand (corresponding to Man as a microcosm), as well as imprints of the divine form on the other (corresponding to Man as created in the Image of God). So while we in *On Virginity* saw that the tension between what we called ethical anti-propositionalism and ethical methodism was resolved by an ethics of moderation (perhaps of an Aristotelian kind), in *On the Inscriptions* a tension analogical to this is resolved by a distinction between Man as created in the image of God (indescribable) and Man as a microcosm (describable). Hence in other words we see a (tentative) shift from ethics to ontology.

While it would be easy to refer this distinction to a simple body-soul distinction (the soul as created in the image of God, the body as a microcosm) Gregory does not, however, explicitly do this.

There are at least three reasons for not seeing the proposed duality in *On the Inscriptions* (but also elsewhere in the early works) as a simple body-soul dichotomy: 1) Virtues are dispositions or states of the soul, not of the body, 2) The marks of virtue (types of joy and shame) are found in the soul, hence the soul can be described and known, at least partly, 3) The harmony produced by "the part" is

901*InIns.* 173
902*DeOp.*, p. 404. This rejection refers to the definition of *man* as a microcosm, rather than more specifically *the soul*.
903*InIns.* 30; *DeAnRes.*, p. 433
904*InIns.* 25 (italics added)

also a matter of a social whole, hence the individual soul and body is not absolutely discernible from its surroundings. At least Man cannot be described as a microcosm without reference to his social context.

Anticipation and the possibility of moral philosophy

In *On the Inscriptions* to begin with Gregory had claimed types of "joy" to be the defining characteristics of virtue and evil. But he subsequently (in the same treatise) argues that the difference between virtue and evil can only be judged according to their ends. Gregory writes that:

> "The means of judging these matters is on the basis of their ends, not on the basis of what is currently at hand. For by that eye of the soul which is capable of contemplation and discernment he has understood what has been stored up for the good through hope as though it were present[...]"[905]

While Gregory had initially talked about the purpose and aim of the virtuous life, he now talks of the end of virtue in terms of hope. The one "who adheres to God through hope (διὰ τῶν ἐλπίδων)" becomes united with Him.[906] Similarly, using the prevalent metaphor of the virtuous life as a wrestling match, Gregory notes that "the labours which they experience in the wrestling are disguised by the honour which is anticipated (ἐλπιζομένης)."[907] The virtuous person "makes day for himself by hoping in the light, by means of which the darkness utterly disappears."[908] Such a thematic of hope and anticipation can be found in *On Virginity,* where virginity is seen as a representation of the blessedness in the world to come (as quoted above). Similarly, in his S*ermons on the Lord's Prayer*, Gregory characterized prayer as "the substance of the things to come".[909] Now, while we might talk of these instances as some sort of anticipatory view of the future 'good' being made present through hope (roughly reminiscent to a Clementine *prolepsis*)[910], it does not seem to have any obvious bearing on ethics as such. Rather than being an active part of practical matters, it seems to be a conclusion of such matters.[911] Still,

905 *InIns.* 41, p. 99
906 *InIns.* 43
907 *InIns.* 73
908 *InIns.* 149. Notice that we again see an identification of moral perfection with metaphors of brightness.
909 Again reminiscent of Hebrews 11:1. Gregory writes that "Prayer is intimacy with God and contemplation of the invisible. [...] Prayer is the enjoyment of things present and the substance of the things to come." *DeOrDom.*, p. 24
910 According to Clement of Alexandria faith (*pistis*) is voluntary preconception (*prolepsis*). This theory was partly inspired by Stoic and Epicurean epistemology. See the part on Clement.
911 In the terms introduced in part one, such anticipation of the future good is not *theologia viatorum,* but *theologia beatorum*.

hope might, in Gregory's early works, be thought of as the presupposition of an eschatological anthropology and ethics, where the alleged dichotomies are dissolved through some sort of anticipation. As noted above, Gregory often talks of ethics in terms of the end or purpose of the virtuous life. But for this the terms σκοπός and τέλος are used, rather than hope. Hence we should be careful about not conflating themes of hope with themes of practical ethics in some grand theory of anticipation (though below we shall see how Gregory's ethics become increasingly *epektatic*). But perhaps the noted anthropological duality, whether ontological or ethical, is what defines human life now, while unity should be conceived as an eschatological matter that can, however, be partly achieved through anticipation? At least some passages in Gregory suggests this, for example when he in his sermons in *On the Beatitudes* argues that the life of the virtuous is not conceived as a duality:

> "We should [...] beware of thinking that [...] the life of the virtuous is conceived as a duality; on the contrary, when the partition wall of evil that blocks us up has been taken away, the two will become one and coalesce, because both are united to the good."[912]

Body and soul becomes one when they are united to God. Only in so far as virtue is lacking does a split between the two occur.

We have already mentioned that the spiritual 'movement' from creation (i.e. perceptions of natural beauty) to creator (i.e. the divine, ineffable beauty) in *On Virginity* is one of discrete continuity. Spiritual progress in Gregory's early works happens in stages. Similarly, it has been noted that Gregory believes the inscriptions of the Psalms to guide to blessedness in fundamentally three stages. This somehow schematic view of spiritual progress is arguably central for making a general ethics possible in the early works.

According to Gregory, the alleged "suggestions and bits of advice" (ὑποθήκαις τισιν καὶ συμβουλαῖς) in the inscriptions has the function of dissuading "from what is inferior" by their reference to virtue (again positive definitions of virtue is primary to negative definitions of evil). Similarly, the representation of the accomplishments of holy men is mentioned in Scripture in order to lead to the good which is equal (ὅμοιον, i.e. not the same, but like) and similar (μιμήσεως).[913] But though Gregory mentions that the purpose of the reference to those admired for virtue and those condemned for evil is that we grasp "the distinguishing mark

912*Beat.,* p. 165
913*InIns.* 161

of each of the lives in advance" this does not amount to, e.g., some sort of biographic ethics,[914] since the temporary order of things made known in the events in Scripture is not necessarily equivalent to the order of the stages of spiritual growth, the "logic of virtue (τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀρετῆς)".[915] Neither is it necessary or possible to mimic the life of virtuous men and women in every detail. In other words, it is the "distinguishing mark" (types of joy and shame, to be sure) of the virtuous and evil lives which is the theme of ethics, not the lives themselves. So, ethics in *On the Inscriptions* ethics revolves around some sort of teleological casuistry, the purpose of the virtuous life being beatitude.[916] And for Gregory this seems to mean that it is only possible to formulate an ethics when one has achieved such beatitude. This is one of the things that makes his whole moral philosophical endeavor a paradoxical one, since he often claims that he has himself not reached the heights of virtue that he tries to describe.[917] Still, since we have the Scriptures, with rules formulated by, e.g., Moses we do have a basis for speaking of ethical principles in a (seemingly) positive form. Moses, Gregory notes, was "the kind of person who no longer needed to be led by law, but could himself become the author of a law for others."[918] This status reflects the duality noted above, but, because of his high degree of spirituality, in Moses the inner and outer (or whatever the dichotomy consists of) are not opposed but mediated.

The above exemplifies that although the ethics of the inscriptions of the Psalms, as Gregory interprets it, is sometimes (and then only initially) stated in negative terms, it is arguably not a negative or *apophatic* ethics as such – only for us who have not reached the peaks of virtue, is moral perfection indescribable, and must be talked about in something akin to negative definitions, if at all: Though Gregory comes close, not even shame is defined as the lack of joy, but rather as a "stamp" or "trace" that reveals the beast (bodily joy) by "the track it leaves behind".[919]

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914 I.e. an ethics that does not abstract from the complexity, historicity of concrete human lifes.

915 "The things which are first and those which are last have been arranged sequentially according to the logic of virtue (τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀρετῆς), and the order is not subject to the material occurence (τῇ ὑλικῇ συντυχίᾳ) of the events." *InIns.* 151

916 By "simple casuistry" is here meant a case-based ethics aiming at producing non-ambiguous propositions that can guide moral conduct.

917 The first instance of such, perhaps mostly rhetorical humility, is in *On Virginity,* where Gregory declares that his knowledge of virginity is useless to him (he might have been married). *DeVir.*

918 *InIns. 43.* Compare this with Plotinus *Ennead* 6.9.7.16-28.

919 *InIns.* 36

Negative anthropology and imitation of God in *On the Making of Man* and *On the Beatitudes*.

Before continuing to Gregory's controversies with Neo-Arianism, we shall briefly consider to which degree his early works contain what we call a negative anthropology. This theme is important from early on, and arguably also increasingly so. We have noted above that Gregory in *On the Making of Man,* calls the idea of Man as a microcosm a mean and unworthy fancy of "some heathen writers"[920]. The anthropology developed by Gregory in this treatise is essentially negative. As God is incomprehensible, so is the human soul.

> "'Who hath known the mind of the Lord?' the apostle asks; and I ask further, who has understood his own mind? Let those tell us who consider the nature of God to be within their comprehension, whether they understand themselves – if they know the nature of their own mind."[921]

The soul is the image of God, and as such it can only be described in negative terms. Gregory argues that "[t]he image (εἰκόνα) is properly an image so long as it fails in none of those attributes which we perceive in the archetype". Hence he notes that the human soul should resemble God by being incomprehensible in essence (οὐσία), in order not to be deficient as an image of God. Hence in *On the Making of Man* Gregory argues that:

> "[…]since one of the attributes we contemplate in the Divine nature is incomprehensibility of essence (τὸ ἀκατάληπτον τῆς οὐσίας), it is clearly necessary that in this point the image should be able to show its imitation of the archetype. For if, while the archetype transcends comprehension, the nature of the image were comprehended, the contrary (ἐναντιότης) character of the attributes we behold in them would prove the defect of the image; but since the nature of our mind, which is the likeness of the Creator, evades (διαφεύγει) our knowledge (γνῶσιν), it has an accurate (ἀκριβῆ) resemblance (ὁμοιότητα) to the superior nature, figuring by its own unknowableness (ἀγνώστῳ) the incomprehensible Nature (τὴν ἀκατάληπτον φύσιν). "[922]

This does not mean that the interior, incomprehensible soul cannot in some way communicate to its material surroundings. This is exactly the purpose or function of the body. The body communicates the soul through conception (*epinoia*), a kind of semiotic device that makes indirect communication possible.

920*DeOp.* 177, p. 404
921*DeOp.*,155, p. 396. Compare with Philo, *De Mutatione Nominum* 7.10
922*DeOp.* 156, p. 396. A similar example of a 'negative analogy' between the soul and God can be found in Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia in illud Attende tibi ipsi* 7, p. 103

> ”Since the spirit is in itself something thinking and immaterial, it would have a savage (ἄμικτον) and incommunicable (ἀκοινώνητον) beauty if its interior movement had not been capable of being revealed by conception (ἐπινοίας φανερου). It is to this end that this organic constitution was necessary, so that the interior movement might succeed in being interpreted (ἑρμηνεύσῃ) through the varied formation of articulations by touching, like a plectrum, the organs destined for the voice.”[923]

Again, while Gregory in *On the Inscriptions* had described eschatology in terms of cosmic harmony, his talk of simplicity (oneness) in the sermons in *On the Beatitudes* suggests that he has made a shift from a more or less stoic view of human nature to one that is more in line with the Neo-Pythagorean or Neo-Platonic idea of simplicity that we find in Clement of Alexandria. For example Gregory writes that:

> “Since then, it is believed that the divine nature is simple, free from composition and impossible to represent, when human nature is liberated from the double composition, and returns perfectly to the good, having become simple and impossible to represent and truly one, then that which appears will be the same as that which is hidden, and that which is hidden the same as that which appears, then truly is carried to accomplishment the beatitude and such men are truly called sons of God”[924]

But what does this mean for Gregory's notion of imitation of, or likeness to, God, here and now? The fact that it is, now, only in a material reality that the soul can be described, though indirectly, in other contexts seem to imply that imitation of God is a matter of imitating not some abstract virtues (though this is a frequent concern for Gregory), but a concrete historical reality. In his sermons in *On the Beatitudes* it is not God's essential qualities, but the character of the incarnated, crucified and risen Christ that is to be imitated. Gregory writes that:

> “[...]the goal of the virtuous life is likeness to the Divinity (τὸ Θεῖον ὁμοίωσις). And yet that which is passionless and undefiled totally eludes imitation by human beings. It is quite impossible for the existence which is subject to passion (τὴν ἐμπαθῆ ζωὴν) to be assimilated to the nature which admits no passions. But if the Divinity 'alone' is 'blessed', as the Apostle puts it (1 Tim 6,15), and sharing (κοινωνία) in beatitude belongs to human beings through their likeness to the Divinity, and imitation is not possible (μίμησις ἄπορος), then blessedness is for human life unattainable. Nevertheless there are some features of godhead which those who wish to may take as models to imitate.”[925]

923*DeOp.* 149, tr. Balthasar 1988, p. 60, modified
924*Beat.* 7.2.160, tr. Maspero 2007, p. 73
925*Beat.* 1.4, p. 26

Is Gregory saying that in so far as the nature of human beings is subject to passions, then there can be no imitation of the Divine? Or is he making the more radical claim that the nature which is now subject to the passions will never be able to imitate the Divine in any full sense, even if it becomes passionless? Becoming passionless means not belonging to the category of things subject to the passions. In this sense imitation of the divine essence is possible, but this does not put the passionless human soul and God in the same positive class of things. Gregory's words in *On the Making of Man* (quoted above) seems to support our claim that likeness to God for Gregory, at least in some contexts, is a negative question. The image, the human soul, resembles the archetype by a negative character, incomprehensibility. Likewise, in the first sermon of *On the Beatitudes*, Gregory sets out to consider the meaning of 'beatitude', but almost immediately after argues that since the mind cannot reach the ineffable and inconceivable good. Hence 'beatitude' must be understood in comparison with its opposite, and the opposite of 'blessed' is 'miserable', the experience of painful and undesirable things.[926]

Of course Gregory is not saying that blessedness is, at the end of the day, unattainable. But he does say that this is not possible by imitating God's essence, at least not positively. But blessedness is attainable, to some degree at least, through imitation of God's external character. Gregory does not here talk in terms of God's essence (οὐσία) versus his activities (ἐνέργεια). But something akin to this arguably shapes his claims (if so, then “some features of godhead” refers to some of God's activities). One of the features of godhead that should be imitated is voluntary humility, as defined by 2 Cor 8:9.[927] Hence, we cannot abstract the idea of imitation of God from the concrete history of salvation in Jesus Christ, at least not in this aspect.

We will discuss this very central issue further below, when we have a more detailed idea of Gregory's theory of language. For now we will notice that Gregory at times conceives of imitation of God as something positively non-essential (i.e. not having to do with a positive imitation of οὐσία). Imitation is of God's activities in the concrete. Gregory's words on baptism in the sermon *On the Baptism of Christ* illustrates this well: We ought narrowly to scrutinize our Father's characteristics, Gregory notes, so that we can fashion and frame ourselves to the likeness of God.[928] From this will (ought to) follow some sort of “manifest proof”

926*Beat.* 1.2
927“though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that we by his poverty might become rich”. 2 Cor 8:9, NIV
928*InDiem.* 237-239, pp. 523-524

(συμβόλοις τισὶ φανεροῖς), even if “of those things which are before our eyes nothing is altered”.[929] Hence such proofs must be of an indirect character. Even if imitation of God has concrete consequences, such imitation stays in some sense invisible.

The polemicism against Neo-Arianism

Gregory's polemics against neo-Arian Anoemeanism[930] in the form of Eunomius of Cyzicus (d. c. 393) did not only affect the Church (in the very concrete form of the creed of Constantinople). It also had an impact on Gregory's own way of thinking about theological issues in the first place, and seemingly also ethical issues in the second. Eunomius and other Anomœans argued that the Son was of a different nature (οὐσία) from the Father. Against (neo-)Arianism Gregory affirmed that “all hope of salvation should be placed in Christ”[931], and thus defended a christocentrism that made it crucial to ensure the theological (ontological) status of the Son.

The argument against Eunomius

Eunomius' view was a form of subordinationism, claiming that Christ cannot be true God. In terms of modern philosophy, his view could be described as an extreme form of positivism: “God knows no more of His own substance, than we do”[932], Eunomius allegedly claimed. According to Eunomius the terms 'generate' (γεννητός) and 'ungenerate' (ἀγέννητος) apply to the essence(s) of the Son and the Father respectively, from which follows that their essence cannot be the same. Hence trinitarianism must be false. In this he relied on a largely Platonic view of language, where concepts are according to nature.[933] In large parts Gregory's strategy against Eunomius was to make clear the absurdity of this view and to propose a different conception of language. Negative theology played a crucial role in this project.

Eunomius claimed that since God's ungeneracy is an essential property, the term ἀγέννητος (ungenerate/unbegotten) is 1) not an invention of human thought and speech (*epinoia*), 2) not a privative definition (in terms of στέρησις, *i.e.* generation

929Ibid. Presumably the characteristics of the body.
930Anomœans (from ἀ(ν)-ὅμοιος) believed the nature of the Father and the Son to be dissimilar, in opposite to the *homoousians*, who defended the formulations of the Nicene Creed.
931*ConEunII*. 50, p. 255
932Socrates *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.7
933I.e. *kata physis* as opposed to *kata thesis*, according to convention. Both views had followers in antiquity.

is not something God is deprived of), 3) not a relational definition.[934] In other words, the terms ungenerate and generate are positively derived from the very nature of God, and as such the very basis of a fully adequate positive theology. For this reason Eunomius also (allegedly) claimed that:

> "[...]whatever we know about the Divine substance, that precisely is known to God; on the other hand, whatever He knows, the same also you will find without any difference in us"[935]

Eunomius had claimed that God is to be defined as οὐσία ἀγέννητος, i.e, 'ungenerate essence'.[936] In Gregory's treatment of Eunomius' argument, he notes that since the Father is ungenerate, the life of the Father is 'prior' to the Son's, i.e. there must be an interval (διάστημα) between the two. This interval, however, must either be infinite, or included within fixed limits. But the distance cannot be infinite, Gregory argues, since there would then be nothing connecting the Father and the Son at all. But it cannot be finite either, since the nature of God is infinite, Gregory claims. Hence there can be no gap between the Father and the Son. Against this Gregory, in his books *Against Eunomius 1-12,*[937] and *Answer to Eunomius Second Book*,[938] held that God's nature is infinite and thus completely unknowable. Hence, terms such as *ungenerate* says nothing about God's essence, and so Eunomius' arguments against trinitarianism must be wrong.

Rather the terms 'generate' and 'ungenerate' says something about the relationship between the divine persons. That the Father is ungenerate is a negative fact. It simply means that he is not generate. That the Son is generate simply means that his person (ὑπόστασις) stands in a certain relationship to the Father's person. But their essence (οὐσία) and nature (φύσις) is common. Positive names applied to the Father and the Son are not about their essence, but their activities (ἐνέργεια) and relations. Hence we see how the Judeo-Christian distinction is applied in favor of orthodox trinitarianism, against theological 'positivism'. What Eunomius failed to understand, according to Gregory, is that we only speak of God's essence in terms of a negative theology. Hence there can be no theological language according to nature (*kata physis*). While Eunomius had scorned at the idea that theological language works conceptually (by *epinoia*), Gregory defends this idea:

934Eunomius, *Apologia* 30.844
935According to Church historian Socrates, *Historica Ecclesiastica* 4.7
936Eunomius, *Apologia* 30.841
937*ConEunI.*
938*ConEunII.*

> “I say, then, that men have a right (εἶναι κυρίους) to such word-building (ὀνοματοποιΐας), adapting their appellations to their subject, each man according to his judgment; and that there is no absurdity in this, such as our controversialist [Eunomius] makes a pretence of, shuddering at it as at some gruesome hobgoblin, and that we are fully justified in allowing the use of such fresh applications of words in respect to all things that can be named, and to God Himself.”[939]

Gregory's way of pulling of this argument is to insist that God is infinite. Or to be more precise, the divine essence is infinite (ἄπειρον) and unlimited (ἀόριστος).[940] Gregory was not the first to make this claim, but he places this doctrine firmly as the basis for his arguments against Eunomius.

Divine infinity and the theology of the gap (*diastema*)

What does it mean that God is infinite? It has been argued that Gregory's primary argument for the infinity of God is that God's goodness, which is essential to God, is unlimited (ἀόριστος), from which follows that infinity and limitlessness must also be a (qualitative) property of His essence.[941] This sounds strangely close to the Eunomian view that God's ungeneracy is an essential property, though it of course differs in ascribing goodness equally to the Father and the Son, where Eunomius had wanted to separate the essence of the two. Still, it seems reasonable to argue that in spite of some formulations in Gregory, his overall view is rather that we can only talk of God's essence in purely negative definitions, which must also mean that His essence is not essentially, in any positive, qualitative way 'infinite' (or if so we would not know what that means).

This is the view of Brightman who argues that not even infinitude is ascribed to the divine nature by Gregory:[942] 'Infinite' is an *apophatic* term, Brightman argues against Mühlenberg's famous interpretation of Gregory. It simply means the denial of any attribution of finitude to God. The divine essence does not belong to the category of things that are finite. This says nothing about God's positive qualities. But Mühlenberg, says Brightman, understands 'infinity' in Gregory too qualitatively. This is not least the case when Mühlenberg says that for Gregory 'infinity' is a “Wesenprädikat fur Gott.”[943] Brightman concludes that “[a]ny study of St. Gregory of Nyssa which does not give adequate treatment to his *apophaticism*

939*ConEunII.* 148
940Gregory identifies ἀόριστος and ἄπειρον. *ConEunI.* 30
941Maspero & Seco 2009, p. 424. *ConEunI.* 77
942Brightman refers to Gregory's homilies on Ecclesiastes: “[Scripture] does not say that God's essence is without limits, judging it rash even to express this in a concept; rather it merely marvels at the vision of the magnificence of His glory.” *Eccl.* 415
943Mühlenberg 1966, p. 202

is *ipso facto* defective."[944] We agree that infinity in Gregory is first of all an *apophatic* denial that God belongs to any finite class of things, even if it also, hypothetically, could be a positive essential predicate.[945] At times this seems to have been Gregory's own view.[946] At any rate this means that any other predicate can only be *apophatic*.[947] Divine infinity means that negation is primary to affirmation, when defining God's nature. Denying that God belongs to some positive class does not automatically allow us to put Him in any other positive class of things, even if we can find a class that is opposite.[948]

What is primary for now is the dialectic set in motion by Gregory's discussions on infinity. Plass' somewhat relational/relative approach should be noted: Plass takes Gregory's view to mean that while the *diastema* is the created, finite measure, the unextendedness of the infinite "could mean both "infinite extension" and "no extension.""[949]. Plass argues that the most reasonable interpretation of this is that God's infinity "is extended when it is related to us" and that "our extension is conversely "frozen" when it is related to God."[950] Or maybe God's infinite extension is the positive side of God having no extension? If both are true it seems that though God is not extended in time, from our point of view eternity is infinite temporal extension in past and future (i.e. a qualitative infinity).

The notion of *diastema* is presumably so central to Gregory's theology that Scot Douglass talks of Gregory's theology as a "theology of the gap".[951] No created being exists outside space or time (the *diastema*), which means that the whole created order is unable to transcend itself. One point where this issue is raised is during Gregory's argument against Eunomius. Gregory's argument raises the question whether God is infinitely distant from creation, or if there is no distance at all? Gregory's answer to this problem is an original one: Distance (*diastema*), he says, is nothing but creation itself ("τὸ διάστημα οὐδὲν ἀλλο ἠ κτίσις ἐστίν").[952]

944Brightman 1973, p. 111

945Hence Pannenberg's claim that "[t]he concept of the actual Infinite has had a firm place in the Christian doctrine of God since Gregory of Nyssa", seems unwarranted, if by this is meant any positive definition of the infinite. Pannenberg 1990, p. 34

946*ConEunII*. 554, p. 306

947We have distinguished between different forms of negative theology. Apophatic theology differs from aphairetic theology. The latter deals in abstraction, the former in negation.

948E.g. 'if God does not belong to the positive class A, and the positive class B is 'opposite' to A, then perhaps God is B'. But this cannot be the case.

949Plass 1980, p. 188

950Plass 1980, p. 186

951Douglass 2005

952*Ecc.* 7.1.729. Balthasar translates *diastema* as "espacement", while Douglass translates it as "gap". Both have different connotations. In the present text we follow Sebanc in using the more neutral, direct transliteration 'diastema' and 'diastasis' etc. Balthasar 1988, p. 28

No being in the created world exists outside either space or time,[953] which also means that the whole created order is “unable to get out of itself through a comprehensive vision”[954] and that “whatever it beholds, it is looking at itself.”[955] Even though “the strength of angels compared with our own seems preeminently great”, being undisturbed by sensation, their power of understanding is basically subject to the same limits as our: “[...]for wide and insurmountable is the interval that divides and fences off uncreated from created nature (πολὺ γὰρ τὸ μέσον καὶ ἀδιεξίτητον, ᾧ πρὸς τὴν κτιστὴν οὐσίαν ἡ ἄκτιστος φύσις διατετείχισται).”[956] Hence, by insisting on the infinity of the divine essence Gregory is able to encounter Eunomius' attack on trinitarian theology.

Against Eunomius Gregory argued that since the *diastema* is an inescapable trait of created things (human nature included), we cannot say anything about the infinite in positive terms. Hence there is no language *kata physis* when it comes to *non-diastemic* being, and so Eunomius' Platonic view on language is false.[957] Instead Gregory defended the ability of conception, which Eunomius had rejected: All our concepts must have been formed by conception (*epinoia*), including those found in Scripture, Gregory argues.[958] From this follows that the term 'ungenerate' cannot be an essential property of the divine nature, but must be a negative definition: “it is a negative attribute of God (ὀυ πρόσεστι δὲ τῷ θεῷ), that neither does the Life cease in dissolution, nor did It have a commencement in generation”[959].

On the ontological level Gregory at times defends what might seem as a form of idealism, where the properties of things are nothing but the notions (ἔννοιαι) and bare thoughts (ψίλα νοήματα) of God, while the substance of things is His will.[960] When these combine, they become matter (ὕλη γίνεται).[961] For similar reasons Gregory at times sounds as a theological voluntarist[962]. There is “no difference between will and performance (βουλήσεως καὶ ἐνεργειας)”[963], says Gregory, and

953*ConEunI.* 368
954*InEccl.* 412
955*InEccl.* 412
956*ConEunII.* 69, p. 257
957That Eunomius' view on language is “Platonic” is Gregory's own interpretation. *ConEunII.* 403-409, p. 291
958*ConEunII.* 183, p. 268
959*ConEunII.* 530, p. 303
960From this it has been argued that Gregory's view was much like Berkeley's. See Hill 2009
961*InHex.* 69, quoted in Sorabji 1983, p. 290
962By voluntarism we understand the claim that God is first of all absolute power and will. Associated with John Duns Scotus, the doctrine is typically contrasted with intellectualism.
963*ConEunII.* 228, p. 273

“all that we can conceive as in Him is entirely work and action (ἐνέργεια καὶ πρᾶξίς)”[964]. This does not make God's properties arbitrary, since Gregory firmly insists on the difference between Creator and creation: The divine essence is always infinite, while creation is always *diastemic*.[965] Moreover, the relation between *diastemic* and *non-diastemic* being is also fundamentally what defines creation (i.e. Creator and creation are, or can be, defined relationally): Gregory notes that “It is precisely through its comparison and union with the Creator that it[creation] is other than him.”[966] In Balthasar's words this means that for Gregory the first essential characteristic of the creature is negative, consisting in the very fact that the creature is not God.[967] Again, this makes it reasonable to see Gregory's understanding of 'infinite' as purely negative, in that infinitude is ascribed to God as a means of distinguishing Him from finite creation (and finite creation from God).

Gregory's theory of conception (*epinoia*)

As noted above already in his treatise *On the Making of Man* Gregory described conception (*epinoia*) as a method by which the incomprehensible soul can indirectly communicate through the body. Conception is as such a way of talking of that which cannot be talked of directly in positive terms. Against Eunomius the Cappadocians defended the legitimacy of inventing new names for God. This was what the prophets did. Divine revelation is not as such a matter of propositional discourses, it seems, but it can be put into human words. Moses revealed the will of God in so far as it was lawful, by “known and familiar words”, thereby describing “God's discourse (διάλογον θεοῦ) corporeally (σωματικώτερον), not indeed expressed in words, but signified by the effects themselves? (τῶν ἔργων αὐτῶν)”.[968]

By conception can be made new names for God. God has no beginning and no generation. The ideas, ἔννοια, of such things can be turned into names (ὄνομαι) by conception.[969] For example “incorruption”, Gregory says “denotes by the privative (ἀφαιρετικοῦ) particle (μορίου) that neither corruption nor birth appertains to God”.[970] It seems that names capture ideas that are not linguistic items, though they have a linguistic, propositional content. Its content is rather its function.

964*ConEunII*. 230, p. 273
965See Jenson 2002, pp. 163-164
966*ConEunI*. 368., tr. Balthasar, p. 28
967Balthasar 1988, p. 27
968*ConEunII*. 268, p. 277
969*ConEunII*. 147
970*ConEunII*. 142

Negatively defined names does not say anything about God, but they refer to God by saying something about what God is not. In this Gregory clearly distinguishes God's essence (οὐσία) from his activities (ἐνέργεια). We can talk in positive definitions about God's activities (ἐνέργεια) as they are revealed immanently to us in time and space (inside the *diastema*), "from what are believed to be His operations in regard to our life".[971] When we speak of God as "overlooking and surveying all things", we talk of something "immanent" (προχείρου).[972] Such positive talk is not possible when it comes to the divine essence or nature as such. This does not mean that we should keep silent about non-diastemic being: "it is a sacred duty to use of Him names privative of the things abhorrent to His Nature"[973], Gregory notes. This we can only talk about by using conception to make up names from negative definitions.

But what exactly is conception (*epinoia*)? Conception is a sort of inventive faculty, it seems, that can be described as neither deduction, nor induction. Every discovery (i.e. all positive as well as negative knowledge) is made through conception, Gregory argues. We seek by "variety (πολυειδοῦς καὶ ποικίλης) of nomenclature (σημασίας) to gain some glimmerings (ἐναύσματά) for the comprehension (κατανόησιν) of what we seek (θηρεύοντες)".[974] Conception enables human beings to talk of that which is outside time and space, *non-diastemic,* transcendent being. But, Gregory notes, in any object that is in this way conceptually discovered we, for the same reason, comprehend "the diastema in the being of the apprehended object"[975]. Hence, what makes conception possible as such also makes use of and thereby includes the limits of its object (i.e. *diastema*).[976]

As such we can distinguish between at least three kinds of conception: 1) Positive, *diastemic* conception, that produces concepts that positively describe the characters of immanent objects experienced in time and/or space (created objects as well as the activities of God), 2) Negative *diastemic* conception, that produces concepts that describes objects in time and/or space by means of negation (created objects as well as the activities of God), 3) Negative, *non-diastemic* conception, that produces concepts that describe the divine nature by way of negation.[977]

971*ConEunII*. 149, p. 265
972*ConEunII*. 149, p. 265
973*ConEunII*., p. 308
974*ConEunII*. 145
975*Eccl*. 412.6-14
976It is not that *diastema* consists in categories of experience as, e.g., in the Kantian sense, but rather that time and space is a property of the objects of experience, independently of our comprehension of these.
977This three-fold distinction is an interpretation. See Gregory's four-fold distinction in

Gregory argues against Eunomius, that “every name is but a recognizing mark placed on some reality or some idea, having of itself no existence either as a fact or a thought (γνώρισμά τι καὶ σημεῖον οὐσίας τινὸς καὶ διανοίας γίνεται πᾶν ὄνομα, αὐτὸ ἐφ ἑαυτοῦ μήτε ὑπάρχον μήτε νοούμενον)”[978]. This might seem to mean that concepts are nothing but conventional names (i.e. nominalism). But rather than just being conventional names in the nominalistic sense, concepts are pointers or signs: By working as guides towards the comprehension of “hidden things” conceptions seem to have a perhaps 'iconic' rather than simply a nominal or symbolic character.[979] We have claimed that conception is neither induction nor deduction. In modern terms something like retroduction or abduction seems to be the most appropriate.[980] Hence theological conception in Gregory could also be described as *theosemiosis*[981].

Each new discovery (arrived at by conception as all discoveries) is a “stepping-stone” to the next, though eventually leading to “the belief that [God] is greater and more sublime than any token by which He may be known (γνωριστικοῦ σημείου).”[982] Correspondingly, it seems that idolatry appears when conceptions loose their semiotic quality and becomes, so to speak, self-referential and thus deified. This is what happened to Eunomius' concept of 'ungeneracy', when the idea it refers to was made into an idol (“εἰδωλοποιῦντες”).[983] It is clear, however, that conceptions cannot be iconic in the simple direct sense, since they do not, as iconic signs, share any positive characteristic with the divine nature.

In spite of the clearly negative theological bend of Gregory's arguments against Eunomius, he at times seems to distinguish between (positive) terms which express qualities inherent in God and (negative) terms which express qualities that are not.[984] This distinction must, however, be considered as purely conceptual (or linguistic), even though Gregory claims that such terms does not have “a uniform significance”. With regards to opposites, there is no difference in saying that the one is, or that the other is not.[985] The change from positive to negative definitions is just formal, Gregory notes. Since 'justice' is the contradictory of 'injustice' we can employ contraries, e.g., by saying that God is “not unjust, which is equivalent

ConEunII. 578, p. 308
978*ConEunII*. 590, p. 309
979See Klager 2006
980For a definition of these Peircean terms, see Liszka 1996
981See our definition in part 1.
982*ConEunII*. 89
983*ConEunII*. 100, p. 260
984*ConEunII*. 131, p. 263
985*ConEunII*. 595

to saying that He is just".[986] Saying that God is good amounts to the same as saying that he is unsusceptible of evil ("ἀνεπίδεκτόν τε πονηρίας")[987]. Again, this shows that we ought to consider the distinction between positive and negative terms above as a purely linguistic one.[988] The meaning of the terms is the same, whether they are negatively or positively defined. Again, all this revolves around a non-qualitative, negative notion of infinity.

If a term says something (seemingly positive) about God's nature it must necessarily do this negatively, i.e. it must contain a non-explicit negation (i.e. non-linguistic, but logical and semantic etc.). This negation must refer to that which is not God, e.g. 'corruption' or 'injustice'. But arguably such terms themselves contain negations referring to God, i.e. 'injustice' means that which is not just (as God is), or is deprived of justice (through privation, στέρησις).

This brings us back to Balthasar's claim that for Gregory the first essential characteristic of creation consists in the very fact that it is not God. This means that God does not derives his identity from creation. That the divine nature can only be spoken of in negative definitions does not mean that, e.g., God's justice is (only) relative to creation (which is un-just, i.e. it lacks justice as an essential property). That God is un-generate does not mean that He is ontologically dependent on His relation to "the ages". This, Gregory argues, would follow from Eunomius' view, which must be taken to imply that essential (intrinsic) properties can be relationally determined. But while this might be true of created nature (which only has its existence through participation, μετουσία), it is certainly not true of God. Hence, while good and evil, Creator and creation, *non-diastemic* and *diastemic* being, etc., are mutually (negatively) defined concepts in terms of epistemology and conceptual matters, God is still ontologically independent of His creation. God does not need creation in order to truly be Himself.[989]

For our notion of conception and negative theology this means that God cannot simply be defined negatively in reference to something that we know positively. Only if these things are understood to be themselves different from God do we understand conception deeply enough. When we say that God is good we implicitly say that he is not-not-good (not lacking of goodness, 'good' means the negation of privation of 'good'). Such empty formal notions only makes sense if conception is more than a purely linguistic method. Conception is, as noted, in principle a

986*ConEunII*. 132, p. 263
987*ConEunII*. 134, p. 263
988It would be an anachronism to apply such categories as 'logical', 'semantic', 'ontological' and 'epistemological', too rigidly to Gregory.
989*ConEunII*. 535, pp. 303-304

semiotic activity. The moment this activity stops and settles for whatever descriptions we might have of God, these become empty and meaningless. Or they become idols, like Eunomius' idea of 'ἀγέννητος οὐσία'. Only by keeping its 'drive' can conception reach outside the *diastema* and thus talk of the God that is beyond words.

God reveals himself inside the *diastema* through his immanent (προχείρου) activities (ἐνέργεια).[990] It is when confronted with these activities, that we are able to invent theological language. But while we can speak of God's activities in positive terms, they are never paths to a positive knowledge of the divine essence, only of its existence. Since the *diastema* characterizes all created things, we cannot say anything about the infinite (*non-diastemic*) in positive terms. All our concepts are formed by conception. That God is in His nature infinite means that all predicates of God's nature can only be defined *apophatically*. God can, essentially, only be defined in negative terms.

Finally some remarks should be made on Gregory's account of Abraham's journey in *Answer to Eunomius' Second Book*. This account has obvious parallels to Moses theophanies as he treats them in *On the Inscriptions* and later in *On the Life of Moses.*[991] Gregory's exposition of Abraham's spiritual journey in the middle of the discussion on conception, suggests that conception and *epektasis* are related matters. This is also evident when Gregory defines conception as "[...]the method by which we discover things that are unknown, going on to further discoveries by means of what adjoins to and follows from our first perception with regard to the thing studied."[992]

Abraham's journey is no migration (μετάστασις) of physical place.[993] Abraham, says Gregory, "[...]desired to behold the archetype of all beauty[...]" and hence he raised his thoughts "[...]as far as possible above the common boundaries of nature (τῶν κοινῶν τῆς φύσεως ὅρων)[...]"[994]. Abraham's journey is a gradual negation of every prejudice about the divine nature, resulting in an ecstasy the moment where Abraham recognizes that God is greater than "[...]any token by which He may be known (γνωριστικοῦ σημείου)."[995] This 'ecstasy', however, is not the final end of Abraham's journey. Rather it becomes the acknowledgment of Abraham's own human weakness, and thus the presupposition of faith, which Gregory, by

990*ConEunII*. 149
991See below.
992*ConEunII*. 182, p. 268
993*ConEunII*. 86, p. 259
994*ConEunII*. 86, p. 259
995*ConEunII*. 89, p. 259

paraphrasing Heb. 11:1, interprets as related to hope rather than knowledge. Gregory concludes: “[k]nowing, then, how widely the Divine nature differs from our own, let us quietly remain within our proper limits (ὅροις … ἡσυχίας).”[996]

This exemplifies Gregory's mature belief that the perfection of human nature consists in its continuous growth in goodness, which is possible precisely because the human nature is limited. Hence we see that the themes of negative theology, *diastemic* conception and hope, are unfolded in *Answer to Eunomius*' *Second Book*. These are the themes that Gregory developed further in his commentary *On the Life of Moses* and his *Homilies on the Song of Songs.*

On the Life of Moses and *On the Song of Songs*

The following primarily deals with Gregory's treatise *On the Life of Moses.* This treatise is similar to *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* in structure as well as theme, but of a much later date. This makes a comparison interesting. The dating, like many of Gregory's works, is a bit unsure, though. Jaeger and Daniélou have placed the dating after 390, while Heine argues for an earlier dating, perhaps in the mid-380s.[997] While this would mean that the treatise was worked out during or shortly after what Danielou categorizes as Gregory's polemical middle-period (from Basil's death in 379 to the end of the Eunomian controversy in 385),[998] rather than during his more “tranquil” later period, it does not change the fact that if the debate with Eunomianism reshaped central parts of Gregory's theological presuppositions, then there would be a good chance that this will crystallize and become apparent in a comparison of *On the Life of Moses* with *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms.* Norris claims that “[t]here can be no question, then, that this is the same Gregory as the one who speaks in *In inscriptiones Psalmorum* and in *Moses.*”[999] Our claim is that, while there are obvious similarities, Gregory's thinking had also changed in important ways.

Already in the sermons in *On the Beatitudes*, which are probably a bit later than *On the Inscriptions*, but not as late as *On the Life of Moses*,[1000] Gregory adopts an epistemologically more negative view on the possibility of describing perfection. But the full consequences of Gregory's negative theology for anthropology and ethics only becomes clear in *On the Life of Moses.* The last parts will discuss how Gregory treats central issues in his commentary *On the Song of Songs.* There are

996*ConEunII.* 96, p. 260
997Daniélou bases his late dating on Gregory's mentioning his “grey hairs”. But as Heine points out, Gregory also mentions this in the writings against Eunomius.
998Daniélou 1966
999Norris 2012, p. xlv
1000Drobner & Viciano (ed.) 2000, Meredith, p. 94

obvious parallels in the *Song of Songs* to *On the Life of Moses.*

Some remarks on the polemical background

That Gregory's explicitly polemical thought influenced his mature views, is a well-known claim.[1001] Hence, Ronald Heine has argued that *On the Life of Moses* should not primarily (if at all) be read as a 'mystical' or spiritual-speculative treatise (as which it is often considered to be)[1002], but as a product of Gregory's long lasting polemical engagement on especially two fronts, namely Eunomianism and Origenism. Heine argues that in *On the Life of Moses* Gregory's discussion of the two first theophanies relfects an anti-Eunomian emphasis, while the third theophany and Gregory's notion of spiritual ascent expresses an anti-Origenist argument.[1003] According to Heine the origins of Gregory's use of the notion of divine infinity in relation to spiritual ascent is to a high degree the controversy on Origenism in the late 370s. During this controversy Epiphanius of Cyprus had attacked Origen’s view of the origin and the final destination of the human soul. Rational souls were created before material creation, and according to Origen, the fall came about when souls grew “tired” or “satiated” (κορός) of contemplating God.[1004] When this happened they fell into the bodily realm. Origen saw the resurrection as a return to the pre-bodily state, but the basic “instability” which caused the fall in the first place would prevail, it seems. In order to explain how this “satiety” came about in the first place, Origen had to presuppose that God was in some way finite, Heine argues.[1005] Heine quotes Koetschau's rendition of *On First Principles*: “[...]if the divine power were infinite (ἄπειρος), of necessity it could not even understand itself, since the infinite is by its nature incomprehensible.”[1006] Hence souls could only have a finite contemplation of God, thus growing tired.[1007]

1001Langerbeck 1957, Heine 1975

1002E.g. Daniélou 1944, Lieske 1939, Koch 1898, Weiswurm 1952, Graef 1954

1003Heine 1975, pp. 194-195

1004According to Marguerite Harl the notion of satiety was used by Origen to explain the fall, though this is only explicit from the reconstructions from the anathemas against Origen by the Second Council. In *On First Principles* Origen, according to Koetschau, allegedly claimed about rational beings that “they were seized with satiety of the divine love and contemplation, and changed for the worse, each in proportion to his inclination in this direction.” See Origen, *On First Principles,* Koetschau, 159.5-9

1005Heine 1975, pp. 74-79

1006*De Principiis* 2.9.1, Koetschau, 164.3-6

1007While this would seem to imply the comprehensibility of God's essence, we should be careful about ascribing such views to Origen. In other passages he claims that God is incomprehensible, e.g. “God is incomprehensible, and incapable of being measured. For whatever be the knowledge which we are able to obtain of God, either by perception or reflection, we must of necessity believe that He is by many degrees far better than what we perceive Him to be.” *De Principiis* 1.1.5-6

According to Heine, Gregory saw "[...]an implicit connection between the two doctrines, supposing that the satiety of souls implied that they had come to full comprehension of the divine nature"[1008]. Gregory never seems to have agreed with Origen that the human soul was created before the body. In *On the Making of Man* there seems to be a logical or ontological, rather than a temporal, priority. But traces of Origen's views on satiety can be found in Gregory's early work(s), for example when he says that "[...]since you fell away from the good because you are changeable, submit yourselves to the good again by means of change."[1009] Gregory resolves the problems of the theory by arguing that the infinity of God means that the soul can contemplate God endlessly, without getting satiated. The soul as such constantly reaches forward, growing infinitely (*epektasis*[1010]). Where change and becoming had for Origen, as for the Platonists, been closely related to sin and evil, it for Gregory became the possibility of spiritual growth. Hence Gregory applied the idea of God's infinity polemically, with the intention of securing the orthodox view on the fall and resurrection.

Though the debate on Origenism is relevant, the following will primarily discuss the effects of the Eunomian controversy. Much of Gregory's negative theology is developed, not as a part of the polemic against Origen's system, but against Eunomius. Our main concern is whether the differences in Gregory's thoughts in *On the Inscriptions* and *On the Life of Moses*, especially regarding the possibility of ethics in general, and the treatment of Moses' life (which is a topic of both treatises), reflects any influence of the view on language and negative theology developed in the critique of Eunomius. It would be strange, Heine notes, if after the conflict with Eunomianism "Gregory should cease to show any concern with this problem in his subsequent writings, especially as Eunomians continued to exist."[1011] The rest of this chapter (and the following), however, will not focus on the directly polemical aspects of *On the Life of Moses,* but on how the polemical aspects of the Eunomian controversy might have indirectly shaped Gregory's mature ethical views. As such the discussion on whether *On the Life of Moses* should be considered a product of a period of tranquility in Gregory's life or as a product of an ongoing, but now more subtle, polemicism (Heine), is left untouched. Eunomius is shortly mentioned (though without name) in the *Song of Songs 8,* but the homilies are rather non-polemical, at least at face value. But as with *On the*

1008Heine 1975, p. 9
1009*InIns.* 46, p. 104. However, already in this passage the opposite of change is not stability, but change to the good.
1010Ἐπέκτασις, extension. See our definition in part 1.
1011Heine 1975, p. 193

Life of Moses the homilies bear traces of the ideas developed through the Eunomian controversies.

Gregory's introductory remarks in *On the Life of Moses*

The treatise *On the Life of Moses* was probably written as a reply to a young (soon to be) priest, Caesarius, who had asked Gregory for advice on how to lead a life fitting for a priest. Moses' life is presented as an allegory for the ideal priesthood. In the introduction to Gregory sets out to obtain “suggestions of virtue” (ἀρετῆς ὑποθήκην) from Scripture, as he had done in *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*.[1012] The history of Moses' life is as a beacon, a clear sign, the memory of which brings “our soul to the sheltered harbor of virtue”[1013]. Hence the purpose of Gregory's treatise is to bring out “the spiritual understanding which corresponds to the history”.[1014]

Hence both treatises are, allegedly, answers to requests from fellows who ask for some sort of moral council for spiritual perfection. But where Gregory had in his early treatise “enthusiastically” welcomed the injunction to investigate the meaning of the inscriptions, he is a lot more reluctant in the work on Moses: “It is beyond my power to encompass perfection in my treatise or to show in my life the insights of the treatise.”[1015] This, of course, sounds much like his words in *On Virginity*.[1016] But what is new in *On the Life of Moses* is the reasoning that follows. Gregory notes that while the perfection of “everything that can be measured by the senses” is marked off by definite boundaries, the perfection of virtue knows no limit, since “no good has a limit in its own nature”.[1017] The good can only be limited by its opposite. Therefore, everything that is marked off by boundaries is not virtue. From this also follows that it is “undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection”.[1018] Gregory closes of the section (1.5-1.9) by introducing the, in Gregory's works by the time of writing already prevalent, theme of *epektasis* (though he does not use that term): “For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness.”[1019]

Introductory notes such as these should prevent us from considering Gregory's treatise as a schematic exposition of the virtuous life. Where Moses' theophanies in

1012*InIns.* 28-29*; DeVitMoys.* 1.15
1013*DeVitMoys.* 1.13
1014*DeVitMoys.* 1.15
1015*DeVitMoys.* 1.3
1016*DeVir.* 1.1, p. 344
1017*DeVitMoys.* 1.5
1018*DeVitMoys.* 1.8
1019*DeVitMoys.* 1.10

On the Inscriptions are clearly understood as a three-stage progress of spiritual ascent, steps in discrete continuity resulting in some sort of enlightenment, it is (as Heine has noted) highly doubtful whether spiritual progress is considered in stages at all in *On the Life of Moses*. Moreover, if the treatise is supposed to provide actual moral guidance to the recipient, a young priest, it seems that it is not Moses' spiritual 'ascension' that is the primary topic of the treatise, but rather the consequences that the epistemological and ontological aspects of this ascension has for our notions of morality. Hence, it is not the 'content' of Moses' spiritual progress, that Gregory teaches Caesarius, but how this 'content' influences Moses' concrete moral practice and shapes the way we should think of ethics.

Negative theology and following in Moses' three theophanies

Throughout the treatise Gregory discusses Moses' three theophanies, which already in *On the Inscriptions* had been schematized as instances of spiritual progress. We have argued that the exposition in this early work fits with an idea of *aphairetic* theology and an *aphairetic* ethics. To start with this is also the case in the mature exposition of the theophanies, but the *aphairetic* idea is superseded by a much more *apophatic* thinking.

The first theophany, the burning bush, Gregory takes to symbolize a spiritual enlightenment, “illuminating the eyes of our soul with its own rays”[1020]. God's commandment to Moses to take of his sandals, Gregory takes to mean that for this illumination to take place, we must purify “our opinion concerning nonbeing.”[1021] This goes all the way down to Gregory's (epistemological) concept of truth: “In my view the definition of truth is this: not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being.”[1022] From this follows (Gregory seems to believe) the ontological truth that “none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists”[1023]. Hence, already in his interpretation of the first theophany in *On the Life of Moses* Gregory seems to be formulating a negative dialectics similar to that discussed above (developed in the writings against Eunomius). Still, the point of the first theophany seems to be that Moses learns, that by putting off worldly (material) things, he draws near to God and thereby comes to a, at first impressions, somewhat positive conception of the divine. Gregory does not actually say in this section that it is not possible to have a

1020*DeVitMoys.* 2.19
1021*DeVitMoys.* 2.22
1022*DeVitMoys.* 2.23
1023*DeVitMoys.* 2.24. That this ontological claim follows from the former epistemological claim of course presupposes that these aspects are logically linked.

positive conception of God's nature. As such, despite of clear negative theological tendencies, this first part of Gregory's exposition is not logically incompatible with his exposition in *On the Inscriptions.*

In the second theophany, the theme of light (which arguably symbolizes positive, spiritual illumination) is replaced by a theme of darkness (which arguably symbolizes a negative theology).

This is more likely to be incompatible with his early treatises.[1024] Gregory himself notes that "[w]hat is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany"[1025]. Knowledge about God comes at first as "light" and is as such perceived as contrary to "darkness". Such knowledge seems to be positive and opposed to the knowledge of evil, which can only be defined negatively. But where truth was first defined as "not to have a mistaken apprehension of Being" (as quoted above), now knowledge of the divine is defined paradoxically as "the seeing that consists in not seeing"[1026]. So Moses' spiritual growth at this points consists in recognizing that what he had thought was positive knowledge about the divine is, in fact, only negative knowledge.

In the third theophany the main theme is that of eternal progress in virtue (*epektasis*). Moses' experience of the divine darkness leads him to acknowledge that all he can do is to follow God. When God walks by Moses who had wished to see God, Moses is only allowed to see God's back, and not his face. Hence, "[t]he divine voice granted what was requested in what was denied, showing in a few words an immeasurable depth of thought."[1027] Gregory soon relates this to a theme of hope: "Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived."[1028] As in the early treatises spiritual progress is a form of anticipation. But what is especially interesting in the exposition of Moses' third theophany is the negative theology implicit in the idea that Moses sees God exactly when his wish is denied. A special notion of ethics emerges from this, as Gregory alludes to Matt 16:24-28:

> "[...]when the Lord who spoke to Moses came to fulfill his own law, he likewise gave a clear explanation to his disciples, laying bare the meaning of

1024In *On Virginity* we lack the full dialectical structure that negative theology introduces into Gregory's later works. The movement is from darkness to light, only. Although Gregory is aware that language cannot capture the divine beauty, this does not yet amount to *apophatic* thought, of his later kind, where beyond light is divine darkness.
1025*DeVitMoys.* 2.162
1026*DeVitMoys.* 2.163
1027*DeVitMoys.* 2.232
1028*DeVitMoys.* 2.231

> what had previously been said in a figure, when he said, *If anyone wants to be a follower of mine* and not “If any man will go before me.” And to the one asking about eternal life he proposes the same thing, for he says *Come, follow me.* Now, he who follows sees the back.”[1029]

Hence Gregory draws from Moses' spiritual experiences an ethics of following (ἀκολουθία), or what might be termed an *akolouthetic* ethics: “[...]to follow God wherever he might lead is to behold God”.[1030] Hence the anti-intellectualistic elements in Gregory's negative theological approach to Moses' theophanies does not mean that these culminate in, e.g., some passive 'blissful ignorance' (as one might be led to believe), but that God's passing by “signifies his guiding the one who follows”[1031]. Moses cannot see God's face, “for good does not look good in the face, but follows it.”[1032] Hence Moses' spiritual journey does not end in the third theophany. Rather it only really begins there.

This also gives us some clues why Gregory believed it to be beyond his power to encompass perfection in his treatise. Things as these are reminiscent of Gregory's statements in early treatises, such as that quoted above, where he notes that the only way to praise virginity is “to show that virtue is above praise, and to evince our admiration of it by our lives rather than by our words.”[1033] In *On the Life of Moses,* any real attempt at formulating en ethical method or formal casuistry is put aside, however. Both Mühlenberg and Heine takes a basically 'non-mystical' stance on Gregory,[1034] and Heine concludes that “what Gregory means by progress in the spiritual life is not that the battlefield on which one fights changes, but that the soldier grows stronger.”[1035] In other words, despite the 'mystical' language in the treatise, spiritual progress is for Gregory more a matter of “improving one's daily life”[1036], than of leaving the concrete and visible world behind. In other words, spiritual growth is thoroughly *diastemic, i.e.* it goes on inside the *diastema.* As such the life of virtue is also always historical (if we by this term mean something that has particular existence in time and space etc.). That this was indeed Gregory's view in his later years can arguably be seen from a shift in what we might call his moral teleology: Where Gregory had in the introductory chapter of *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* claimed that the goal (τέλος) of the virtuous life

1029*DeVitMoys.* 2.251
1030*DeVitMoys.* 2.252
1031*DeVitMoys.* 2.252
1032*DeVitMoys.* 2.253
1033*DeVir.*, p. 344
1034'Non-mystical' in the sense that spiritual progress does not end in, e.g., illumination or a union with the divine in any sense. Heine 1975, p. 197; Mühlenberg 1966, pp. 147-69.
1035Heine 1975, p. 196
1036Heine 1975, p. 196

is beatitude (μακαριότης), he in the closing chapter in *On the Life of Moses* notes that “the goal of the sublime way of life is being called a servant of God.”[1037] For Gregory this seems to be more or less synonymous with being “known by God and to become his friend”. This, however, is given a partly negative definition in that Gregory notes that “disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful”[1038].

Where the theology and ethics of *On the Inscriptions* was largely *aphairetic*, the theology and ethics of *On the Life of Moses* rather ends up being *apophatic*. Gregory's reading of Moses' theophanies in the former is mostly about removing ideas of evil from the conception of God, so that the good can stand out unmixed. This is a process of abstraction. In the latter this is initially also the case in Moses' theophanies (as when Moses removes his shoes), but abstraction turns out to have a limited use and must be substituted for negation.[1039]

Following does hardly mean to follow specific rules or ethical principles (see below), even if the term can mean being consistent with or following in an orderly sequential manner, as in logical deduction, or even be used of soldiers in a line up.[1040] Such interpretations suggest a rather 'rigid' idea of following, which seems incompatible with Gregory's line of thought in *On the Life of Moses,* where friendship to God ends up being central:

> “This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because like slaves we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some business-like and contractual arrangement. On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God's friend (τῆς φιλίας τοῦ Θεοῦ) the only thing worthy of honor and desire.”[1041]

This passage is interesting since following was up till then understood in terms of 'anticipation', hope or reaching forward (*epektasis*). But all this is now secondary to 'friendship' with God. Gregory seems to be drawing on Philo in this, though the idea can also be found in the New Testament and early Patristic sources.[1042] But if Gregory's apparent equation of following and friendship (he does

1037*DeVitMoys.,* p. 136
1038*DeVitMoys.* 2.319, p. 137
1039Notice again that Gregory does not distinguish technically between negation and abstraction. This distinction is ours, as developed above.
1040LSJ, ”ἀκολουθία”
1041*DeVitMoys.* 2.320, p. 137
1042E.g. Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit* 7.44

not identify these explicitly) is to be coherent, friendship with God must mean a concrete imitation of his activities in history with humankind. This would fit with the οὐσία/ἐνέργεια-scheme, which renders positive imitation of God's essence impossible.

In his discussion of the second theophany Gregory notes that:

> "Moses learns at first the things which must be known about God (namely, that none of those things known by human comprehension is to be ascribed to him). Then he is taught the other side of virtue, learning by what pursuits the virtuous life is perfected."[1043]

In other words, virtue has two sides, a negative and a positive. The negative side is primarily epistemological, while the positive is practical.

What Moses experiences is this: First he experiences God's activities (ἐνέργεια) as revealed inside the *diastema.* But he then realizes that the only way he can move beyond *diastemic* being is through negation. Finally he realizes that this process cannot be terminated in a final comprehensive, though negative, vision of God. Moses realizes that the only way of upholding a contemplation of *non-diastemic* being is through a continuous relation with *diastemic* being, inside the *diastema*, which he can never escape. To follow God is in this sense the ethical aspect of what in epistemological terms is an ongoing conception or semeiosis. These come together in *epektasis,* where virtue and knowledge are united.

Language, epistemology and ethics in *On the Song of Songs*

There are obvious similarities between *On the Life of Moses* and *On the Song of Songs.* For example in a passage much similar to the introduction to *On the Life of Moses,*[1044] where the good is defined as unlimited, Gregory writes that:

> "[...]where there is no place for evil, there is no limit set to the good. In the case of the mutable sort of being, both the good that is in us, and the evil as well, are limited by each other's effects, because our capacity to choose has an equal power for motion in the direct of each of the opposites."[1045]

The "simple and pure and uniform and unalterable Nature" is unlimited in goodness and never alienated from itself. It does not participate in evil, and sees "no limit of itself", since it sees "none of its contraries in itself".[1046] Hence here God's infinity is closely related to His simplicity.

1043*DeVitMoys.* 2.166
1044*DeVitMoys.* 1.5
1045*Cant.* 158, p. 171
1046*Cant.* 158, p. 171

As in *On the Life of Moses* God's infinity leads to the idea of *epektasis*. Spiritual ascension is a matter of continuously transcending the limits of perfection: "[...]" the outer limit of what has been discovered becomes the starting point of a search after more exalted things"[1047]. No point in this process is self-contained, but points to the next: "[...]nor does the starting point of ever-greater things find fulfillment simply in itself."[1048] This arguably reflects the fact that nothing *diastemic* is self-contained.

As truth is in *On the Life of Moses* initially defined as not having a mistaken conception of being, the light-metaphor used to express this finds a parallel in the *Song of Songs:* "[...]when darkness departs it is strictly necessary that light be visible in its place, and when evil has gone away, that good be introduced in its stead".[1049] But as in *On the Life of Moses,* beyond light is darkness. God is found in the "[...]the very darkness of obscurity (γνόφος ἀσαφείας)[...]"[1050]. Moses entered "into the darkness in which God was"[1051], and Gregory writes that:

> "[...]the revelation of God to the great Moses began with light as its medium, but afterward God spoke to him through the medium of a cloud, and when he had become more lifted up and more perfect, he saw God in darkness."[1052]

Gregory does not mention the third theophany, however, which in *On the Life of Moses* is interpreted as Moses' experience that all he can do is to follow God. This theme is brought in at another point, though.

The divine power is "inaccesible (ἀπρόσιτόν) and uncontainable (ἀχωρητον) by human thought processes (λογισμοῖς)", since God's nature has no boundaries and so cannot be comprehended by "the connotations of words."[1053] Since God's name cannot be spoken or grasped by any rational nature, His name is "the soul's attitude (σχέσις)" towards God.[1054] Norris argues that this attitude, love, is simultaneously a name that declares not the nature of God, "but only his effect on us."[1055] Hence 'love' (ἀγάπη) is in this respect a conception that pertains to God's activities, something we know through his immanent works of atonement.[1056]

On God's activities Gregory writes that:

1047*Cant.* 249, p. 261
1048*Cant.* 249, p. 261
1049*Cant.* 298, p. 315
1050*Cant.* 26, p. 29
1051*Cant.* 181, p. 193
1052*Cant.*, p. 339
1053*Cant.* 36, p. 39, modified
1054*Cant.* 61, p. 69
1055Norris 2012, p. 69 footnote
1056As God's mercy in *ConEunII.* 151-152

> “Stirring all her thought processes and all the exploratory power of her concepts, and striving earnestly to comprehend what she is seeking, she attains, as the limit of her apprehension of God, nothing more than that divine activity (ἐνέργειαν) that comes down and reaches to us, and which we sense through the medium of our life.”[1057]

Notice that we sense God's activities through “our life (διὰ τῆν ζωῆς ἡμῶν).”[1058] Gregory argues that “knowledge of the Good that transcends every intellect comes to us through the virtues”.[1059]

God is known solely by his activities, but when contemplating God the soul realizes that God's “existence is known only in incomprehension (ἐν μόνῳ τῷ μὴ καταλαμβάνεσθαι) of what it is, in whose case every conceptual trait (γνώρισμα) is an obstacle to its discovery for those who seek it.”[1060] Even so, by way of what can be seen is formed a conjecture (καταστοχάζεται) about the incomprehensible (τὸ ἀκατάληπτον).[1061] Our thought(s) (νόημα) concerning the divine nature is a “likeness (ὁμοίωμα) or image of what we seek”.

> “All speech, however, that refers to such intuitions has the function of some indivisible mark, being unable to make clear what the mind intends. Thus all out thinking is inferior to the divine understanding, and every explanatory word of speech seems to be an abbreviated tracery mark that is unable to embrace to breadth of the act of understanding.”[1062]

What is spoken is not unambiguous, but “more like a probability (εἰκασμῷ)”, since what is said “is not bound to any single meaning”.[1063]

The ethics in *On the Song of Songs* can at times be described as '*aphairetic*'. Just as a statue is made by removal of the bits, the evil dispositions of the soul must be scraped away by the tools of one's thoughts.[1064] Gregory argues that:

> “Our greatest safeguard is not to be ignorant of oneself and not to suppose that one is looking at oneself when in fact one is viewing something else, something that hangs about the outer edges of oneself. This is the affliction of those who do not seriously appraise themselves.”[1065]

Gregory mentions strength, power, glory, riches, pride, dignity, good looks and

1057*Cant.* 334, p. 353
1058*Cant.* 334, p. 353
1059*Cant.* 91, p. 101
1060*Cant.* 183, p. 195. Is Gregory saying that it is only in so far as we realize that we do not know what God is that we know that God is?
1061*Cant.* 36-37, p. 39
1062*Cant.* 86-87, p. 97
1063*Cant.* 139, p. 151
1064*Cant.* 408, p. 433
1065*Cant.* 63, p. 71

similar, as the things to aware of.[1066] As in *On the Life of Moses* the pomegranate is used as an allegory for the "life that is harsh and self-controlled and austere"[1067]. But Gregory has not left the idea of virtue as moderation: "[...]every virtue is a mean between two evils, that which falls short of the good and that which exceeds it."[1068] As in his early works Gregory still talks of perfection in terms of stages. The term for following (ἀκολουθία) is often used more or less synonymously with order (τάξις). For example Gregory writes that:

> "[...]one can see in the soul something analogous to the ages of the body, stages by means of which there is discovered particular order and sequence (τάξις τις καὶ ἀκολουθία) that brings the human person to the life of virtue."[1069]

The purified soul anticipates "the one who is coming in the future as if he were already present"[1070]. Again we see how virtue is a matter of relating to a future goodness through anticipation.

As in other contexts moral perfection cannot be thought of independently of the history of salvation. Gregory asks: "[...]how could a mortal and perishable nature be adapted to live together with the imperishable and inaccessible, unless the shadow of the body had mediated between the Light and us who live in darkness (cf. Isa 9:1)?"[1071]. God becomes "limited for your sake and dwells in you", but is simultaneously not confined as he penetrates human nature.[1072] As such Paul was the "palpable dwelling" of the "impalpable Nature".[1073]

Before the revelation of God's grace, the gentiles were far removed from God "by a great intervening space (διαστήματι) of ignorance".[1074] This is arguably the epistemological equivalent of the *diastema* that ontologically separates creation from Creator. As God bridges this gap in the incarnation a new epistemological foundation is laid. The equivalent of this in 'biblical' terms is the dynamics between Law and Gospel, which Gregory also discusses in *On the Song of Songs.* This theme is related to Gregory's idea of following: As noted, Gregory when describing Moses' theophanies in the 11th homily does not describe the third theophany. But he does that in the 12th. As in *On the Life of Moses* Gregory interprets Moses'

1066*Cant.* 64, p. 71
1067*Cant.* 230, p. 241
1068*Cant.* 284, p. 299
1069*Cant.* 18, p. 19
1070*Cant.* 144, p. 157
1071*Cant.* 108, p. 119
1072*Cant.* 68, p. 75
1073*Cant.* 88, p. 97
1074*Cant.* 205, p. 217

experience as an ethics of following:

> "[...]the Scripture teaches that a person who desires to see God catches sight of the One he seeks by always following (ἀκολουθεῖν) after him and that the contemplation of God's face is an unceasing journey toward him that is brought to fulfillment by following behind the Word."[1075]

Gregory says about Philip that "[...]once he had become the Lord's "find" (as the Gospel says, Jesus "*found* Philip"), he was made a follower (Ακολούθει) of the Word who said to him, "Follow me"".[1076] What does such following consist in? When the soul is "transposed into the intelligible and immaterial realm" it becomes a "supremely vivid image (ἐναργεστάτην εἰκόνα) of the prototypical Beauty."[1077] This brings us back to a theme from *On Virginity*. Here Gregory talked of "the man who acts as well as teaches, as the Gospel tells us, he is the man who is truly living, and has the bloom of beauty, and is efficient and stirring."[1078] Every virtue is made manifest in life (διὰ τοῦ βίου) by being displayed in "habitual conduct".[1079] When this happens the soul becomes an imitator of Christ and becomes "toward others what Christ became for the human race".[1080] Hence the 'vivid image' or the life in which the virtues are made manifest cannot be abstracted from a person's relationship to others. The result is that such a person will also be imitated: "[...]when one individual has made something his business, that form of activity makes its way into the stream of our life by being imitated."[1081]

The Word, Gregory argues, follows a certain sequence (ἀκολουθία) in adapting human nature to God. There is a certain dialectic between the prophets and the Law: "the windows are the prophets, who bring in the light, while the lattices are the network of the law's injunctions." The law casts the shadow of the good things to come.[1082] Through the prophets and the gospel is radiated the Word that "destroys the shadowy imagery of the type" and takes away the "dividing wall".[1083] The law is "the wall of the evangelical faith",[1084] but the soul that has heard the Word ("beheld the rays of light come through the prophetic windows"), remain "no longer under the shadow of the law's wall".[1085]

1075*Cant.* 356, p. 377
1076*Cant.* 432, p. 459
1077*Cant.* 439, p. 467. Compare with Clement of Alexandria, *Str.* 7.9.52.3, p. 538
1078*DeVir.*, p. 368, modified.
1079*Cant.* 442, p. 469
1080*Cant.* 443, p. 471
1081*Cant.* 453, p. 481
1082*Cant.* 148, p. 161
1083*Cant.* 148, p. 161
1084*Cant.* 162, p. 175
1085*Cant.* 162, p. 173

The whole of Scripture is spiritual law,[1086] Gregory argues, in the sense that everything in Scripture guides to purity, through "[...]explicit commands (φανερῶν παραγγελμάτων), but also through its historical narratives (ἱστορικῶν διηγημάτων)"[1087]. There is on opposition between the (outward) Law and the Gospel, but they are inseparable. The Law is the form, through which the Word shines. Hence the order (ἀκολουθία) through which the Word adapts human nature to God goes through an outward to a spiritual understanding of the law.

In his reading of Romans 1:20[1088] Gregory argues that "the foundation of the cosmos" should be understood as the creation of the Church. God's "invisible things" are not his incomprehensible being, but "the economy (κατ' οἰκονομίαν)" of salvation.[1089] God's invisible things, the new heaven and earth, are revealed in the Church, which was established as the body of the invisible God. As such the 'bridegroom' can be discerned through the 'bride',[1090] and through the Church the wisdom of God is made known. This wisdom consists in the knitting together of contraries. Hence it is through the Church that it is revealed "[...]how the Word becomes flesh; how life is mingled with death; how by his own stripe our calamity is healed; how by the weakness of the cross the power of the Adversary was overthrown"[1091], etc.

This is idea of contraries is expressed in the fact that both the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2:9 are described as both standing in the midst of the garden. Gregory interprets this paradoxically, in the sense that they are placed at the exact same location:

> "[...]life is the very center of God's plantation. Death on the contrary is, in and of itself, rootless and unplanted, since it has no place of its own. It is in consequence of the absence of life that death gets planted, when living beings lack participation in the nobler condition."[1092]

Hence this paradox expresses that fact that evil is nothing more than privation of good. The tree with the knowledge of good and evil is in itself a paradoxical image.[1093] The fruit "possesses a power mixed together out of opposites", or rather

1086As in Rom 7:14, "ὁ νόμος πνευματικός ἐστιν"
1087*Cant.* 5, p. 5. Gregory subsequently argues for the legitimacy of analogy by referring to Paul's use of the Abraham story in Gal 4:20
1088"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities (τὰ [...] ἀόρατα)—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made[...]". Rom 1:20, NIV
1089*Cant.* 384-385, p. 405
1090*Cant.* 256, p. 269
1091*Cant.* 255-256, p. 269
1092*Cant.* 349, p. 369
1093*Cant.* 351, p. 371

“good and evil are one and the same thing”. By this Gregory means that evil as well as pleasure (a misconceived kind of 'good') leads to death.

The interdependence of the two trees means that the way to the tree of life goes through a negation of the knowledge brought about by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Through an exposition of Matt 5:37, “let your word 'yes be 'yes,' and your 'no be 'no'”, Gregory argues that 'yes' and 'no' are inseparable: “[...]the truth in the “yes” is equally discerned through both”.[1094]

As a matter of epistemology this is somewhat equivalent to Gregory's definition of truth in his exposition of Moses' first theophany in *On the Life of Moses:*[1095] “[...]the truthfulness of one's idea of that which authentically *is,* [...] is in truth the “yes.””[1096] But to this should be added that Gregory seems to define truth as a negation of positive knowledge as such. Hence Norris argues that what Gregory recommends is “a negative action – that supports the affirmation of Truth.”[1097]

This is the order through which the soul is adapted to God. It is through death that the soul gains life. By dying the soul emerges into life.[1098] It is a good thing to be struck, Gregory says, since this is how the soul is freed from death: “by killing he gives life, and by striking heals”.[1099] This is not something that only happens in, e.g., baptism. Paul died every day, Gregory explains, so that “at every point he was going over into new life, dying to the past and forgetting things that were already over and done.”[1100] Hence such contraries are what connect past and future in a constant progression in virtue, *epektasis*. This progression is given impetus as the soul is reminded of “the hopelessness of what she seeks”, and then realizes that the “true fruition” is to ever and again discover the divine beauty to be greater than what can be comprehended.[1101]

Re-reflections on Gregory's ethics

Finally we will discuss some of the issues that we have touched upon in Gregory's views on ethics, in a way that makes it easier to abstract these from their particular contexts, even at the risk of imprecision, anachronism and so on. Gregory's idea of virtue as participation (μετουσία) in the godhead is central. We will discuss this from the perspective of some of the subjects that we have touched

1094*Cant.* 374, p. 395
1095*DeVitMoys. 2*.23
1096*Cant.* 376, p. 397
1097*Cant.* p. 397 footnote
1098*Cant.* 347, p. 367
1099*Cant.* 362, p. 383
1100*Cant.* 366, p. 387
1101*Cant.* 370, p. 389

upon above. Our claim is that we cannot properly understand this concept without letting Gregory's negative theology play a role. Participation in God is simultaneously a positive and a negative relationship. It is simultaneously imitation of the divine nature and the works of Christ. In positive terms it is a matter of following Christ. As Mateo-Seco says on Gregory's idea of imitation of God:

> ”For Gregory, the theology of the imitation of God is identified with the theology of the imitation and following of Christ, the participation in his name (”Christians” bear the same name as Christ), and the sacramental participation in the mysteries of his life, particularly in his death and resurrection. Like Clement of Alexandria and Origen before him, Gregory firmly unites imitation of the divine nature and imitation of Christ.”[1102]

The dialectic character of participation in God unfolds in Gregory's conception of progress in virtue (what we generically call *epektasis*). This idea might seem primarily relevant in relation to personal or individual ethics, rather than social ethics. But this theme should also be touched upon, and so finally we will shortly discuss Gregory's view of political power. This may seem even more misplaced, but his many scattered critical remarks on different forms of domination turn out to be good examples of how the relationship between theology and moral ontology has practical consequences for social ethics.

The possibility of moral judgment

If we based on Gregory's thinking want to define such normative concepts as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, we should, not surprisingly, look to his theory of language and his negative theology. The characteristic of the divine nature is to transcend all characteristics.[1103] But by making use of negative definitions, conception enables us to invent signs that points beyond the *diastema*, to the ineffable, divine nature, by negating the properties of the created nature. For example Gregory notes that:

> “[...]when we see the execrable character of evil, we grasp His own unalterable pureness as regards this: when we consider death's dissolution to be the worst of ills, we give the name of Immortal and Indissoluble at once to Him Who is removed from every conception of that kind”[1104].

God is that “in which evil finds no place, and from which no good is absent”.[1105] Often we see this strategy applied to normative concepts as well. We either convey

1102Mateo-Seco, ”Imitation” in BDG, p. 502
1103*DeVitMoys.* 2.234
1104*ConEunII.*, p. 298
1105*ConEunII.* 146

“the idea of goodness by the negation of badness, or *vice versa*”[1106], Macrina noted according to Gregory in the dialogue *On the Soul and Resurrection*. This arguably implies that 'evil' can (and should) be defined negatively, i.e. (as is common) as the lack of good. But since God is incomprehensible, to put it sharply this seems to imply that 'good' can only be defined as not 'not-evil'. But 'evil' is equal to 'not-good', and 'not-good' to 'not-not-evil' and so on. In other words, an *apophatic* term can refer to its referent by logically being a double negation of itself, i.e. the definition of A is nothing but ~~A. This might seem as implying double negations *ad infinitum* (~~A=~~~~A etc.), so that we never get to a positive definition of A, which would make such *apophatic* terms parts of an empty structure, without any external reference. But this is to oversimplify things, since there is still the difference between negation and privation in play. This is why 'not-evil' cannot simply be identified as 'good' if not 'good' is understood implicitly as the negation of the privation of 'good'. In practice *apophatic* terms clearly does have a function, since they have a reference to something beyond our conceptions (God, goodness, virtue). They might not have any intension besides the negation of all other intensions, but they do have an extension.[1107]

In the passage from *On the Soul and Resurrection* quoted above, Gregory says that:

> “[…]Now granted that the inquirer has had his doubts set at rest as to the existence of the thing in question, owing to the activities (ἐνέργεια) which it displays to us, and only wants to know what it is, he will have adequately discovered it by being told that it is not that which our senses perceive, neither a colour, nor a form, nor a hardness, nor a weight, nor a quantity, nor a cubic dimension, nor a point, nor anything else perceptible in matter; supposing, that is, that there does exist a something beyond all these.”[1108]

But as noted above, even if God is defined negatively with references to creation, He is still ontologically independent of His creation. The term 'good' is an

1106*DeAnRes.*, p. 436

1107By 'intension' we mean the definition of a term, by 'extension' the class of things picked up by the term. Negative definitions of God might not have any positive intension, but by denying other intensions they exclude everything from their extension, but God. Or rather, using a two-dimensional logic, we could say that the primary intension of implicitly *apophatic* conceptions is the ordinary positive meaning, while the secondary intension is a negative definition., e.g. the term 'God' means 'good' on the one hand, and 'not evil' on the other, or 'ungenerate' means 'God' on the one hand, and 'not generated' on the other (which of course does not mean that 'goodness' supervenes on 'not-evil'). Following Gregory's definitions idolatry appears when the secondary intension falls away. For a discussion of two-dimensional logic, see Chalmers 1996

1108*DeAnRes.*, p. 436. This is clearly different from Gregory of Nazianzus' view, as discussed above. *De Theologia* 28.9

epinoetic conception that works as a sign. As such it points beyond language, to the ineffable divine nature. While *apophatic* terms might be considered 'empty' on a purely linguistic and logical (etc.) level, they point to an ontological truth, namely that God is absolutely independent of creation.

This is also true for positive definitions, that are not implicitly negative. All such positive descriptions we use of God, are according to his activities, never his essence (since this is inaccessible). Concepts such as 'mercy' and 'pity' does not refer to abstract properties of the divine essence (neither positively or negatively), but to God's work in the world in relation to human beings. In the *Answer to Eunomius*' *Second Book* Gregory writes that:

> "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, long-suffering, and of great goodness. Now what do these words tell us? Do they indicate His operations, or His nature? No one will say that they indicate aught but His operations. At what time, then, after showing mercy (οἰκτιρμοὺς) and pity (ἐλέου), did God acquire His name from their display? Was it before man's life began? But who was there to be the object of pity? Was it, then, after sin entered into the world? But sin entered after man. The exercise, therefore, of pity, and the name itself, came after man."[1109]

Again, this should remind us that the history of salvation and atonement is central for understanding positive moral concepts and virtues. In his catechism Gregory notes that "one cannot observe a good purpose in the abstract; a purpose cannot possibly be revealed unless it has the light of some events upon it."[1110] This arguably reflects the relationship between the incomprehensible essence of the human soul and its comprehensible activities. Gregory adds that "the things accomplished, progressing as they did in orderly series and sequence, reveal the wisdom and the skill of the Divine economy."[1111]

Since it is not possible for Christ not be justice, purity and truth, etc., it is not possible to be a Christian without displaying these virtues. There is a moral ontological necessity at works in the relationship between the nature and the virtues of a person. Gregory argues that:

> "If, therefore, someone puts on the name of Christ, but does not exhibit in his life what is indicated by the term, such a person belies the name and puts on a lifeless mask in accordance with the model proposed to us. For it is not possible for Christ not to be justice and purity and truth and estrangement from all evil, nor is it possible to be a Christian (that is, truly a

1109*ConEunII*. 151-152
1110*OrCat.*, p. 491
1111*OrCat.*, p. 491

Christian) without displaying in oneself a participation in these virtues."[1112]

Gregory's ethics does not mean that no positive moral epistemology is possible. It is possible to talk in positive terms about God's activities in creation. And since the human soul is (created in) the image of God, moral judgment of a directly descriptive kind must be possible in concrete situations, where human activities unfold with their diversity of particular characteristics. But such activities never makes human nature comprehensible in positive definitions. If conceptions, moral judgments, about human activities have any meaning beyond a particular situation, this must either be conceived of historically *(diastemically),* in virtue of their relations in time and space, or *apophatically*, in virtue of their pointing negatively beyond themselves and the *diastema,* to the divine nature.

So how is it then possible to talk of ethics with Gregory's ethics and epistemological framework in mind? Gregory's exposition of Abraham's spiritual journey in the middle of the discussion on conception, suggests that conception works very much like *epektasis*. This is also evident when Gregory defines conception as "[...]the method by which we discover things that are unknown, going on to further discoveries by means of what adjoins to and follows from our first perception with regard to the thing studied."[1113]

The dialectics of *epektasis* (and following) could be defined as consisting in a liberation from sin and servitude, symbolized in *On the Life of Moses* by 'Egypt', on the one hand, and a movement towards the opposite, namely freedom and deification, symbolized by 'the promised land', on the other. The former (negative) aspect is especially present in Gregory's emphasis on freedom in the sense of liberty (ἐλευθερία) and impassibility (ἀπάθεια).[1114] The latter (positive) aspect can be found in terms of self-mastery (αὐτοκράτεια) and 'beauty' (a recurring theme from his early works). But these are aspects of *epektasis*, not separate things. Gregory's apophatic philosophy of language reminds us, that any positive description of virtue (deification or beatitude) must implicitly be a negation of non-virtue (liberation, overcoming of sin) and *vice versa.*

Speaking of names as icons, as Gregory sometimes does, might also be helpful. Ethics as an *epinoetic* discipline becomes a description of iconic signs,[1115] that can as such be true, but never adequate. The activities of human beings can be described through conception, by which is also opened an indirect access to the

1112*DeProf.* 133.15-20
1113*ConEunII.* 182, p. 268
1114*ConEunII.*, p. 452
1115Klager 2006

ineffable nature of the human being. As such ethics is in a sense '*iconographic*'. Though names are nothing more than recognizing marks that we place on things, they still have the ability of working as guides towards the comprehension of "hidden things". Names have an iconic rather than simply a nominal character.[1116] In a sense idolatry appears when the iconic and *apophatic* character of conception is overlooked, so that descriptions seem to be simple confirmations of actual properties. This is what happened to Eunomius' concept of *ungeneracy,* which Eunomius believed to be a positive definition, even if it is seems obvious that it is not.[1117]

If moral judgments are arrived at by conception, then absolutizing moral norms, as if some ethical principle could fully describe the good, has this in common with idolatry that it misunderstands the iconic and implicitly *apophatic* character of conception. It was precisely because of the insight that "[...]none of those things known by human comprehension is to be ascribed to Him[...]", that it was possible for Moses to formulate a law for others.[1118] Hence in following, moral judgments are meaningful only insofar as they express this and simultaneously point beyond themselves, as stepping stones. Hence ethics of following, *akolouthetic* ethics, must be distinguished from one of abstract principles *simpliciter.* Only when formulated in negative (*apophatic*) terms are ethical principles of a more general kind possible. Ethical principles can only play a minor role in following. As *epektasis,* following moves, so to say, *intra-diastemically.* And as all language, moral judgment is always relativized by time and space. At most ethical principles are conceptions that leads from one spiritual state to the next.

Often it seems that Gregory believes that only the virtuous can formulate moral principles. Only by being in a process of spiritual progression can a person formulate an ethics. Moses (being a priest), as described in *On the Inscriptions,* was the kind of person "who no longer needed to be led by law, but could himself become the author of a law for others." In *On the Life of Moses* Moses' priestly (mediatory) role is now more centered around his function as liberator. Through "the illumination from above", Gregory notes, Moses "considered it a loss not to lead his countrymen to the life of freedom."[1119] Arguably Moses' person is now conceived from the perspective of the atonement, so that Moses' through his deeds becomes a type of Christ. But since Moses' must keep on following God, this status is not something that is finally achieved once and for all. Hence neither can Moses

1116See Klager 2006
1117*ConEunII.*, p. 260
1118*ConEunII.*, p. 96
1119*DeVitMoys.* 2.89

be capable of formulating a final and adequate ethics.

Is the notion of participation in God an *apophatic* conception?

A central concept in Gregory's work is μετουσία, participation (Gregory also uses the term μετοχή, sometimes he talks of fellowship or κοινωνία).[1120] This notion, somewhat peculiar to Gregory's thinking, is used frequently to describe participation in divine things. In the Platonic tradition participation is usually described in terms of μέθεξις. David Balás mentions that there is at least sixty instances of μετουσία in Philo, who is likely to be Gregory's source for this notion.[1121] Balas notes that though Gregory talks of the creature's participation in God it should not be understood as a matter of the creature possessing God's nature. When Gregory about intelligible nature writes that "its growth toward the better is not confined by any limit", we should arguably keep this in mind. The good that is given at any particular time is always a starting point for something better, which, it seems, also means that the creature never 'owns' perfection in its own right.[1122] Only God possesses, is identical (φύσει, κατ οὐσίαν) with the good. Again, becoming has priority over being, when talking of created nature.

Balás writes that:

> "[...]in reality the relationship between God and the rational creature participating is rather the inverse. God is the personal source continuously giving a share in a divine perfection to the creature; that latter is recipient (though not an entirely passive recipient). Now whereas μετοχή (derived from having) would stress the active possession of a perfection, μετουσία (derived from "being") stresses more that the participant "is with" or rather "dependently with" the One in whom he participates."[1123]

But being does here clearly not mean a static being, but one of constant becoming (by receiving). Balás further argues that since participation in God is for Gregory not a matter of being in a certain fixed stated, but a process, μετουσία expresses "the relationship envisaged between the (rational) creature and the Creator". Balás furthermore distinguishes between vertical and horizontal participation. In the former participation the creature participates in the Creator (in the sense described above, as receiving)[1124], while in the latter things share in

1120Virtue is participation in the godhead. *Cant.* 285, p. 301
1121David L. Balás, "μετουσία" in BDG, pp. 500-501
1122*Cant.* 174, p. 187
1123Balás, "μετουσία" in BDG, pp. 500-501
1124The whole creation derives its goodness by participation: "[...]the Church believes, as concerning the Son, so equally concerning the Holy Spirit, that He is uncreated, and that the whole creation becomes good by participation in the good which is above it [...]". *AdSimp.*

the common nature of the species.[1125] Balás argues that participation in God (μετουσία θεοῦ) is for Gregory nothing but participation in God's perfections in their totality. The participating creature does not have (does not posses) God's essence (οὐσία), but continuously becomes perfect (receives perfection) by partaking in his perfections. This means that the distinction between Creator and creation is not blurred, but rather upheld, by participation. Hence that the creature continues to exist *diastemicall*y (διαστηματικῆ), is not contrary to its participation in God.[1126] But Balás warns against interpreting Gregory of Nyssa simply in terms of Gregory of Palamas's notion that 'μετουσία' means participation in the divine activities (energies).[1127]

A positive concept of participation cannot be separated from a negative one. Participation in Gregory is participation in the divine activities, but also, perhaps, in some sense in the essence of God, though only negatively. While the former can be said in a positive sense, the latter is only negatively possible. But from (negative) participation in the godhead must follow (positive) participation in the "secondary elements" that follows. Gregory writes that:

> "If we who are united to Him by faith in Him, are synonymous with Him whose incorruptible nature is beyond verbal interpretation, it is entirely necessary for us to become what is contemplated in connection with the incorruptible nature and to achieve an identity with the secondary elements [virtues] which follow along with it."[1128]

Jesus Christ becomes 'Lord' "[...]by bringing the Human Nature to that participation in the Godhead which is signified by the terms Christ and Lord."[1129] But this does not mean that Christ has changed essentially (he is always one with the Father in essence). It is through the historical works of God in Christ that human beings can come to participate in God in a positive sense. In practice it is not God understood as the abstract infinite that are to be followed, but the concrete personal incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Gregory distinguishes between following "precepts in the way of teaching" and Christ "Who leads the way", by his deeds. Hence Gregory writes that:

> "[...]the method of our salvation was made effectual not so much by His precepts in the way of teaching (ἐκ τῆς κατὰ διδαχὴν ὑφηγήσεως) as by the deeds of Him Who has realized an actual fellowship with man, and has

1125Balás, "Participation" in BDG, pp. 581-582
1126See Balás 1966
1127Balás, "Participation" in BDG, p. 586
1128*De Professione Christiana ad Harmonium*
1129*ConEunI.* 6.2

effected life as a living fact (ἔργῳ τὴν ζωὴν ἐνεργήσας).”[1130]

Following the deeds of Christ establishes “[...]a kind of affinity (συγγένειά) and likeness (ὁμοιότης) between him who follows and Him Who leads the way.”[1131] This is how imitation (ἡ μίμησις) must be regulated.

As quoted above Gregory says in his first sermon of *On the Beatitudes*, that God “totally eludes imitation by human beings”[1132], since He is “passionless and undefiled”. But Gregory simultaneously argues that it is the job of Christians to imitate the works of Jesus Christ as known in the divine plan of salvation. If these two passages are to make sense in union, then “participation in the Godhead” must positively mean imitation of the concrete historical deeds of God in the world. Participation in God means participation in his love for human beings, his philanthropy (φιλανθρωπία).[1133]

So what is the relationship between the human and divine nature, epistemologically speaking? As noted above, in *On the Making of Man* Gregory most interestingly argues that “since the nature of our mind, which is the likeness of the Creator, evades our knowledge, it has an accurate resemblance to the superior nature”[1134]. This argument is of course not 'logically sound': That 'a' and 'b' does not share certain properties does of course not mean that we can deduce that they share all other properties they have. This does not make Gregory's reasoning illegitimate, though: Rather than arguing from certain premises to a conclusion, Gregory's statement can be seen as what might be termed a negative analogy. Where an icon represents its object by its possession of (some of) its characters, the sign in such negative analogies represents its object negatively, by means of the characters it does not have.

Yet an example of such a negative analogy between the human and the divine nature can be found in Gregory's arguments against Eunomius:

> “For if some one, wishing to describe the nature of man (τοῦ ἀνθρώπου φύσεως), were to say that it is not lifeless, not insentient, not winged, not four-footed, not amphibious, he would not indicate what it is: he would simply declare what it is not, and he would be no more making untrue statements respecting man than he would be positively defining his subject. In the same way, from the many things which are predicated of the Divine nature, we learn under what conditions we may conceive (ὑπονοεῖν) God as

1130*Cat.* 35, p. 502
1131Ibid.
1132*Beat.* 1.4
1133*Cant.* 107, p. 119
1134*DeOp.*, p. 396

existing, but what He is essentially, such statements do not inform us."[1135]

In the Aristotelian idea of negation (ἀπόφασις) negative properties denotes that something does not belong to certain classes of things. Saying that God is not virtuous, and that animals are not virtuous does not at all imply that God and animals belong to the same class. It only means that both are neither able of being virtuous or non-virtuous since this property only belongs to human beings. So if it is true that participation in and imitation of God is essentially (κατ οὐσία) a negative matter, then Gregory's logic works differently than Aristotle's. Being virtuous is for Gregory a negative property. It means not being vicious (viceful, lacking, deprived of virtue). Hence This also means, however, that saying that something participates in the godhead is implicitly synonymous to saying that something does not participate in what is different from God. In this sense 'μετουσία θεοῦ' is an *apophatic* conception. As virtue can only be defined as the negation of the privation of virtue, participation in God can only be thoroughly understood with negative reference to that which is not God.

Ontology and the idea of *epektasis*

All this is of course related to Gregory's notion of *epektasis.* It is in *epektasis* that negative and positive participation is held together. Already in *On Virginity* and *On the Making of Man,* there is a thematic of anticipation and hope. Human beings can have the "good things" promised, by way of hope.[1136] But this idea is radicalized and transformed in his later works. Paul's words on "the things God has prepared for those who love him" in 1 Cor 2:9, which "has not entered into the human heart", Gregory quotes as a proof for the idea that the "process of ascent" has no outer limit.[1137] That participation in the godhead is essentially a negative thing (but a positive things in regard to following) is maybe also what makes Gregory's idea of continuous growth in virtue possible. Hence Gregory argues about the soul's participation in the divine good that, "[...]when she has shared, as far as is possible for her, in the good things, he draws her toward participation in the transcendent Beauty just as though she had hitherto had no part in them at all."[1138]

Gregory of Nyssa's idea of moral perfection and progress in virtue (*epektasis*) has been taken up in a range of modern discussions.[1139] We will now discuss a few

1135*ConEunII.* 144
1136*DeOp.*, p. 412
1137*Cant.* 247, pp. 260-261
1138*Cant.* 159, p. 171
1139E.g. Hart 2003; Brewer 2009

of these. The above issues of moral epistemology are central to a discussion of modern issues of moral epistemology taken up by Talbot Brewer in his *The Retrieval of Ethics.* Brewer argues that practice is often construed around what he calls 'dialectical activities'. These activities aim at an intrinsic goodness that is more or less 'opaque'. As practices are entered they become self-revealing.[1140] Hence intentions are not propositional attitudes. Brewer's concept of dialectical activities is interesting since he illustrates his notion with reference to Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa's concept of *epektasis* (eternal progress in virtue).

In Brewer's definition dialectical activities have an intrinsic value. This value is more or less opaque to those who lack experience with the activity, but it unveils itself incrementally as one gains first-hand experience.[1141] This means that actions have a “symbolic or expressive” relation to a subjective picture of goodness, rather than a justificatory. It is only possible to make sense of the symbolic and expressive character of actions if allow reference to this kind of opaque value.[1142] Brewer argues that it is “[t]he fugitive and perfectionist nature of the concept of the human good that guarantees the endlessness of the dialectic.”[1143]

Brewer develops his idea with reference to Gregory. But for Gregory, there are profound metaphysical reasons why *epektasis* can continue infinitely (namely the infinity of God). Brewer fails to take the theological premises seriously enough for his notion to be useful as a way of dealing with Gregory. If we are to think of *epektasis* as dialectical activity (which we have good reasons to do), we either need to be sure to distinguish it from other forms of dialectical activity (with a more limited character) or we need to claim, more radically, that *epektasis* is the only true form of dialectical activity.

Above we have mentioned Robert Jenson's use of Gregory of Nyssa's idea of divine infinity. Robert Jenson has also argued that Gregory's notion of time comes close to Wolfhart Pannenberg. This is interesting in the present context since it can easily turn out to be related to the idea of *epektasis.* According to Pannenberg 'the whole' becomes the future goal of striving only within the finite realm. The future, in terms of eschatology, should have a primacy in the understanding of time.[1144] Hence, “[...]the totality of existence is possible only from the standpoint of its future.” Faith, accordingly, is a form of anticipation. As we have seen anticipation,

1140Brewer 2009, p. 39
1141Brewer 2009
1142Brewer 2009, p. 179
1143Brewer, 2009, p. 41
1144Pannenberg partly bases this on a reading of Plotinus against Augustine. Pannenberg also utilizes the Clementine proleptic idea of faith. Pannenberg 1990, p. 78

hope and similar ideas play a central role in Gregory's notion of the virtuous life.

Robert Jenson's claim is that Gregory prioritizes the future as defining for existence, as Pannenberg. The passage in Gregory's *Against Eunomius,* that Jenson uses as example is this:

> "[…]the past period of his life is nothing to him who has lived it, and all his interest is centred on the future and on that which can be looked forward to, that which has no end will have more value than that which has no beginning. So let our thoughts upon the divine nature be worthy and exalted ones; or else, if they are going to judge of it according to human tests, let the future be more valued by them than the past, and let them confine the being of the Deity to that, since time's lapse sweeps away with it all existence in the past, whereas expected existence gains substance from our hope."[1145]

Above we have argued for views similar to these. To recall, often in Gregory the present and the future is bound together in prayer: "Prayer is the enjoyment of things present and the substance of things to come." Or take an even more famous quote, from *On the Life of Moses:* "This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him."[1146] We must always reach out for what is ahead (*epektasis*), and not linger on the present, since the presence is always in some sense 'unreal' (without being in itself). Only God has real being, but the reality of God always lies ahead. So far so good. But is this enough to establish a Pannenberg-like notion of the primacy of the future based on Gregory? Against Jenson, Morwenna Ludlow has argued that the quoted passage is first of all a piece of 'rhetoric'. This, Ludlow argues, is proved by the context.

> "[…]Gregory's suggestion that the Arians ought to accentuate the positive in God, by stressing his future orientation, is in fact sheer sarcasm – not advocacy of a Pannenberg-style eschatologically directed God, as Jenson would want."[1147]

Ludlow argues that Gregory's ontology is not of the Pannenbergian kind. According to Gregory, God is infinite throughout past, present as well as future. So perhaps Jenson is too eager to think in terms of ontology? In Gregory it is hardly the future that is the establishing point for existence, but the cross, Christ's death and resurrection. The constant process of dying and coming to life that this sets in motion is what drives *epektasis* (at least according to our discussion of *On the*

1145*ConEunI.*, p. 98
1146*DeVitMoys.* 2.239, p. 116
1147Ludlow 2007, p. 47

Song of Songs above). It is in this sense that becoming is prioritized over being, not in the sense that the future defines the reality of the present. Such a relationship is at most secondary. But speaking in terms of epistemology and ethics, the 'future' is nevertheless the focal center-point. For the human subject looking forward to what lies ahead is possible exactly because of the resurrection. But to see this we need to think in terms of *epektasis* and conception. There are good reasons for developing the thematic of anticipation in terms of these. Above we have argued that Gregory's idea of conception can be described as a form of theosemiosis. Interpreting God's work in the world is a kind of iconic semiotic. Things consist (are conglomerates) of 'divine thoughts'[1148], and are thus icons that point beyond themselves to an infinite nature that can only be described indirectly.[1149] Such sem(e)iosis spawns new iconic signs and thus continues infinitely.[1150]

Infinity and freedom

Gregory's ethical thinking turns the whole scheme of negation and affirmation in relation to virtue and vice upside down. This means that human beings can imitate God without compromising the Judeo-Christian distinction. It even means that human beings can imitate God's ineffable nature, since God's essence is purely negatively defined. God's essence is infinity, freedom, incomprehensibility and so on. God's essence is not a thing, but a no-thing. Robert Jenson argues that:

> “Infinite being is an odd sort of being. It cannot be anything other than its infinity, cannot be an infinite something, for there can be no infinite something: A substance without clear boundaries could be only a wavery, insubstantial substance, and a substance with no boundaries must instantly dissipate. Just this observation was the starting point of Hellenic philosophy’s analysis of the notion of infinity. An infinite something would always generate new characteristics beyond those that make its given self at any moment. Thus Aristotle: “That is infinite … which has always something beyond itself.” Therefore an infinite something would have no “nature” at all, for a “nature” is precisely what defines, that is, limits, the possibilities of an entity.”[1151]

So, according to Jenson, in a sense the Christian God in the Cappadocian analysis does not have a nature or an essence in any traditional sense. Jenson

1148*Hex.* 69
1149*DeAnRes.*, p. 436
1150Annette Ejsing has argued that Michael Raposa's version of such a Peircean theosemiotic can be conceived of in terms Pannenberg's theory of anticipation. Ejsing 2007
1151Jenson 2002, pp. 163-164

continues:

> “The syllogistic proof “All humans are mortal. Socrates is a human. Therefore Socrates is mortal” transforms the true guess that Socrates is mortal into actual knowledge, but it can do so only because humanity names a fixed and finite set of characteristics. Did it not, the minor premise would instantly transform itself into a whole new syllogism, with its own minor premise, which would do the same and so on; and the security of knowledge, as over against guessing, would never be achieved. On both these counts, God–in the judgment of Hellenic philosophy–cannot be infinite; this is the one negative predicate that cannot fit deity, for it is deity’s function to be the final object of knowledge, the middle term of the proof of the world’s existence. And the very difference of God and world, of timelessness and time, presumes that God is not the world and is not temporal, that is, that there are limits to what deity is and can be.”[1152]

If the concept 'humanity' did not name a fixed and finite set of characteristics then it would, in other words, spawn an infinite semeiosis. This is exactly the case in Gregory since participation in the godhead means not to participate definitely in any finite set of characteristics. To participate in God means in this sense to be indefinite.

This might be the key to understanding Gregory's idea of 'freedom'. Already in the treatise *On Virginity* Gregory defines liberty (ἐλευθερίαν), “the moral habit of liberality”, as the point of Christian ethics.[1153] But only in his later works are the epistemological and ontological requisites of this ethical view unfolded. In a most interesting passage in *On the Soul and Resurrection,* Gregory notes that:

> “[…]liberty [ἐλευθερία] is the coming up to a state which owns no master [ἀδέσποτόν] and is self-regulating [αὐτοκρατὲς]; it is that with which we were gifted by God at the beginning, but which has been obscured by the feeling of shame arising from indebtedness. Liberty too is in all cases one and the same essentially; it has a natural attraction to itself. It follows, then, that as everything that is free will be united with its like, and as virtue is a thing that has no master, that is, is free, everything that is free will be united with virtue. But, further, the Divine Being is the fountain of all virtue. Therefore, those who have parted with evil will be united with Him; and so, as the Apostle says (I Cor. 15.28), God will be "all in all "; for this utterance seems to me plainly to confirm the opinion we have already arrived at, for it means that God will be instead of all other things, and in all.”[1154]

1152Jenson 2002, pp. 163-164

1153*DeVir.* 7.3.13, p. 352. In this, one might argue, Gregory rather neatly combines Paul, e.g., in 1 Cor 6,12 with an Aristotelian doctrine of the middle.

1154*DeAnRes.* 101-105

Similarly, virtue has no master, Gregory says in the *Song of Songs*. Virtue "is voluntary and free of all compulsion."[1155] In his homilies on Ecclesiastes, where Gregory attacks slavery, he notes that not even God enslaves what is free.[1156] In *On the Life of Moses,* Gregory talks of the Word as a "liberator from tyranny"[1157], and Moses as having the role of a mediator who gives his people "the words of freedom"[1158] and thereby strengthens their desire for freedom.

Gregory interprets the chariot chasing the Israelites as a picture of the tripartite division of the soul.[1159] Hence, the crossing of the Red Sea becomes a picture of baptism in which we drown "the whole Egyptian person", i.e., "every form of evil".[1160] The radical interpretation of this would be that Gregory rejects positive anthropology as such, as he had done in *On the Making of Man*. A less radical interpretation would note that it is only the passions belonging to the tripartite soul that should be "drowned". At any rate, Gregory is now at odds with his early belief, that "the face of God" (the divine form) can be contemplated in certain "imprints" (the virtues).[1161] This is at least true if the virtues here can be described in positive definitions. Virtues would then be incapable of expressing the inexpressible nature of the divine. But if the virtues cannot be described in positive definitions, then things would seem to be different. Virtue, it seems, is simply the lack of 'slavery', and freedom always something negatively defined (e.g. ἀ-δέσποτόν). This does not mean that we cannot talk of the positive works of a human person in concrete contexts.

Social ethics and Gregory's critique of political power

Since God is beyond comprehension, nothing which can be comprehended in this world should rationally be regarded as absolutely valuable. What is obvious for everyone is that this world is subject to death and decay. We know this, especially, in winter when "[a]ll things mimic the misery of death."[1162] Observations such as these often contain the negative (natural) theological starting point of Gregory's critique of domination and power (force). Criticism of Paganism is in a sense criticism of what in modern terms is called ideology.

1155*Cant.* 161, p. 173
1156*Eccl.*, tr. Hall, p. 336. See the discussion of Gregory's social ethics below.
1157*DeVitMoys.* 2.56
1158*DeVitMoys.* 2.54
1159*DeVitMoys.* 2.123
1160*DeVitMoys.* 2.126
1161*InIns.* 35. Such talk of "divine form" seems quite contrary to Gregory's later explicitly apophatic theology.
1162*Cant.* 151, p. 165

> ”Most people do not judge for themselves how things stand by nature. Instead, they look to the customs of their forebears and fail to achieve a sound judgment about reality, because they set up an irrational habit as their criterion of the good rather than any intelligent consideration. Consequently, they thrust themselves into positions of authority and power and make much of prominence in this world and of material things[…]”[1163]

The premise for this reasoning is basically a polemical negative theology. Nothing of what can be seen and thought is God, and so it is irrational to pursue things in this world. But Gregory's critique of political power goes further than this. On the positive side it is grounded in his trinitarian theology. Trinitarian orthodoxy (that God is three persons in one being) has practical consequences through the social analogy. The divine persons all participate in the divine essence. Likewise, every human being to some degree participates in human nature (a horizontal participation with Balás' term), which again participates in the divine nature (through horizontal participation). Hence, saying as Eunomius does, that the Son (Christ) is not equal with the Father, is like saying that some human beings are not equal to others. After introducing the social analogy during his polemicism against Eunomius, Gregory argues that human governments experience revolutions since it is “[…]impracticable that those to whom nature has given equal value should be excluded from power”[1164]. Human beings instinctively attempt to make themselves equal with the dominant party, since they have a common nature.

This line of thought can be easily recognized in Gregory's famous attack on slavery. In his sermons on Ecclesiastes, Gregory discusses the Qohelet's statement “I bought male and female slaves”[1165]. Gregory argues that turning the property of God (humankind) into one's own property and to arrogate dominion to one's own kind implies overstepping one's “own nature through pride”. By dividing humankind in two it has become “enslaved to itself” and “the owner of itself”.[1166] There is an almost Kantian line of thought in this (according to, perhaps, especially the second definition of the categorical imperative):[1167] The division of human species in two is (almost) a logical absurdity. The premise is that humankind is in principle undivided, and that domination brings division.

Gregory continues his argument by noting that not even God himself holds power

1163*Cant.* 2, p. 73
1164*ConEunI.* 1.35, modified.
1165Eccl 2:7, NIV
1166*Eccl.* 336
1167Kant 1785, §4. Of course the whole theological context is very different from Kant. According to Kant the doctrine of the trinity could per definition not have any practical consequences.

of human beings, since he "when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom."[1168] Again, the atonement plays a central role in Gregory's ethical thinking. The participation in God that human nature is made capable of does not mean an 'enslavement' to God, but freedom.

In his sermons in *On the Beatitudes* Gregory argues that true justice is first of all a question of moral virtue. As was common in antiquity, Gregory viewed virtuous/moral dispositions to be related to happiness. Gregory notes that when the beatitudes says "blessed are they that hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall have their fill" (Matt 5:6), we should understand that "hunger" is the desire for what one is lacking spiritually. While worldly, finite, things never really bring lasting satisfaction, devotion to God does, since God is the only true, infinite good. Happiness consists in loving God, and those who "hunger and thirst" after justice, will have their fill, i.e. happiness, precisely because justice is not a question of ruling fairly, but of practicing devotion. This can always be done independently of one's worldly circumstances. So far, Gregory's view is reminiscent of Plato's in *The Republic.* Plato argues that justice is not only a question of the harmony of the city state, but also of the soul, i.e. moral virtue. But Gregory goes further than this, and argues that:

> "[...]if, according to the words of those outside the fold [i.e., Pagan philosophers], the purpose of the just man is equality, but on the other hand pre-eminence presupposes inequality, then this definition of justice cannot be regarded as true"[1169].

True justice does not admit anything bad, Gregory states. So not only is justice more than a question of political distribution, but, by presupposing injustice, political justice becomes impossible. In order to distribute money, one needs to accumulate wealth; in order to punish crimes, one needs to obtain political power, and so on. Again the idea that humanity share a common essence and thus a common ownership, shapes Gregory's thinking.

In his sermon on slavery in the *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* Gregory argues that slavery means setting one's power above God's, not so much because God is the only 'master', but because God has once for all set humankind free:

> "God would not therefore reduce the [human] nature (τὴν φύσιν) to slavery, since he himself, when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to liberty (εἰς ἐλευθερίαν). But if God does not enslave what is free, who

1168*Eccl.* 336
1169*DeBeat.* 112, p. 358

is he that sets his own power above God's?"[1170]

Hence not only is Gregory's critique of domination based upon an idea of equality derived from the ontology of humankind. Gregory's critique is also based on an idea of freedom grounded in the historical events of the cross and resurrection. The freedom Gregory speaks of arguably reflects our negative definition of what it means to participate in the divine nature. Through its participation in the godhead, made possible by the incarnation, humankind has been set free in the radical sense that it is now capable of self-determination.

Conclusion

Scot Douglass has argued that the primary value of Cappadocian thought lies in the "performative aspect of their Christian proclamation", rather than in a systematic metaphysics:

> "There was a performative invitation to enter into an encounter, mediated by the constant re-reading of Scripture and the recounting of lives and epiphanic events according to the liturgical calendar, that asked of the listener an epinoetic engagement, an imaginative leap back into the world of Moses, into the lives of saints and martyrs, into the silence of the Holy of Holies, and around the very edges of the inaccessible."[1171]

Theological thinking is not external to *epektasis*. Conception, the formation of iconic linguistic items that point towards the ineffable divine nature, is an engaged endeavor that cannot be disconnected from moral progress. *Epektasis* involves the whole human person, in its vertical relationship to God as well as its horizontal relationship to its context. But as negation is with Gregory logically prior to affirmation when speaking of the divine nature, the invisible is prior to the visible. Hence there can be no imitation of God's work in history without imitation of God's transcendent invisibility.

Ethics in Gregory of Nyssa is complex and many-faceted. Hence we have talked of it from many perspectives. The central keywords are: *aphairetic, apophatic, epektatic, akolouthetic, biographic, iconographic*. All these concepts have been used generically, though they are to some degree derived from Gregory's own writings.

Where Daniélou and others have interpreted Gregory's *On the Life of Moses* as a mystical treatise, Heine and others have interpreted it as rather polemical and non-mystical. While both of these options might be partly right and partly wrong,

1170*Eccl.* 335-337, p. 336, modified.
1171Douglass 2005, p. 247

both fail to point out the basic dialectical mechanism at play in the center of Gregory's thinking. To put it in short, what Moses recognizes is that when we 1) put off material (*diastemic*) ideas of God's nature we approach God (the first theophany), 2) but thereby recognize that we cannot know and speak of God's (*non-diastemic*) nature (the second theophany), except in negatively defined terms, 3) which must eventually make us recognize that the only relationship we can have with God is one of following (that *diastemic* nature is related to *non-diastemic* human nature through *epektasis*).

Conception as it unfolds in *epektasis* frames the possibility of ethics. We are here talking of theological ethics as *theologia viatorum.* Gregory defines conception as “the method by which we discover things that are unknown, going on to further discoveries by means of what adjoins to and follows from our first perception with regard to the thing studied.” In this “going on to” seems to resonate Gregory's famous notion of *epektasis*, the final spiritual journey where the soul infinitely reaches out into the divine beauty. Conception should be regarded dialectically as the actual 'reaching out' as well as the product of the journey, an 'infinite semiosis'.[1172]

Where ἀκολουθία is ofte used as a term for a particular order in a text, reflecting certain stages of progression in the spiritual life, it in Gregory's later works also becomes a matter of following Christ, where ever he may lead. Finally this is conceived in terms of friendship.

1172See Hart 2003

Part V. Final remarks

In the previous parts we have attempted to exemplify the relationship between the negative theology resulting from the Judeo-Christian distinction and moral epistemology. We will now reconsider some of the more general discussions already hinted at in the first part, in the light of a few contemporary discussions.

A *living* image of God: Theological ethics and the problem of (in)visibility reconsidered

We claimed in part one that the idea of *epektasis* must follow from the fact that any negative theology based on the Judeo-Christian distinction must be a *theologia viatorum.* This, we have argued, is the case in Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa. We can hardly derive any idea of *epektasis* from *The Epistle to Diognetus.* But its claims about divine invisibility and imitation of God does mean that there can be no final ethical system with regards to human conduct in the world. Rather the Christian follows whatever norms are present in society. This leads to a certain relativism with regards to everyday conduct. With regards to imitation of God there is, however, no doubt that this must always consist in love of neighbor as exemplified by Jesus Christ's concrete works in the history of salvation. These two themes comes together in the concrete, in a paradoxical manner.

The thinking of Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa can to a large degree be seen as an attempt, if not to dissolve this paradox, to bridge the gap between the visible and the invisible, then at least to explain how the tension between the poles create the framework for a life of moral perfection. Anticipation plays a central role in this. In Clement, knowledge “[...]leads us to the endless and perfect end (τέλος ἄγει τὸ ἀτελεύτητον καὶ τέλειον), teaching us beforehand (προδιδάσκουσα) the future life that we shall lead[...]”[1173] Gregory's interpretation of Moses' third theophany as the experience that seeing God means to follow him arguably has a similar point. Gregory's ethics is firmly based on his theological ontology. Moses' vision of God's back is “[...]a sign for an elusive intermediate region, a quasi-space and quasi-time between God's totally transcendent face and the spatial/temporal creation.”[1174] It is the dialectics of this “intermediate region” (which can of course be no “region” at all, except through the incarnation and resurrection of Christ) that transforms Man's attempt at spiritual ascension into an

1173*Str.* 7.10.56.2, p. 539
1174Plass 1980

ethics of following God. The gap between Creator and creation is bridged in an ethics of following. But this bridging can never be final or actual. In the words of David B. Hart, "[...]for beings, in their becoming, being is absolute futurity."[1175] Human beings are always in a state of becoming. In *epektasis* the soul is "in a certain fashion, always being created as it is changed for the better by being enhanced in goodness."[1176] In *epektasis* becoming has priority over being. But this does mean that God only exists as futurity. It is precisely because only God is stable and immutable, while everything created is subject to change, that *epektasis* is needed, and can take place.

There are differences between Clement and Gregory, to be sure. Clement argues that the soul should be abstracted from the body, since "it is impossible that the immutable should assume firmness and consistency in the mutable (ἐν τῷ τρεπομένῳ τὸ ἄτρεπτον ἀδύνατον λαβεῖν πῆξιν καὶ σύστασιν, ἐν τροπῇ)."[1177] This suggests an incompatibility between the Clement and Gregory's somewhat paradoxical *diastemic* ontology, where human immutability or unchangeability simply consists in a constant change to the better (since nothing created is permanent). But in both cases anticipation in terms of such things as *prolepsis, epinoia* and *epektasis,* and similar, is what bridges the gap between the visible and the invisible, and makes actual imitation of God possible.

So what does it mean to imitate God, and finally: How can we describe moral perfection? In Clement, neither ordinary Christians, nor the true Gnostic, are expected to reflect too much on their conduct. The ordinary Christian does "good works", but without knowing what they do,[1178] while the constancy in well-doing makes the virtue of the Gnostic somewhat invisible.[1179] This does not mean that the Gnostic cannot be described, but as the truth can only be represented by veiling and concealment, the same is arguably the case with virtue. On the other hand, when the Gnostic considers the benefit of his neighbour, he is a "living image of the Lord (ἄγαλμα ἔμψυχον εἰκότως ἂν τοῦ κυρίου λέγοιτο)", by "the symbol of power (κατὰ τὸ τῆς δυνάμεως σύμβολον) and similarity of preaching."[1180] In a similar way Gregory describes the soul that reflects the divine as a "supremely vivid image (ἐναργεστάτην εἰκόνα) of the prototypical Beauty."[1181] We sense God's

1175Hart 2003, p. 229. Hart claims, partly based on Gregory of Nyssa, that finite being is always 'erotically' and 'ecstatically' standing beyond itself, directed towards the infinite divine beauty.
1176*Cant.* 174, p. 187
1177*Str.* 6.9, p. 498
1178*Str.* 1.9.45.6, p. 310
1179*Str.* 4.22.138.2, p. 435
1180*Str.* 7.9.52.3, p. 538
1181*Cant.* 439, p. 467. Compare with Clement of Alexandria, *Str.* 7.9.52.3, p. 538

activities through “our life (διὰ τῆν ζωῆς ἡμῶν)”[1182], says Gregory.

We have suggested above that we can talk of an *iconographic* ethics.[1183] The idea was that conceptions applied to describe the moral character of a person signifies the good which that person imitates. Human beings are made in the image of God, and describing what this means is to do 'iconography'. That the medium of God's activities is our life suggests that such *iconographic* ethics is more precisely a matter of biography.[1184] *Apophatic* or otherwise negative descriptions of virtue as a reflection of the ineffable God, must be followed by a concrete, narrative, *biographical* ethics.

This might prove to fit well with developments in modern Christian theological ethics, where such things as biography and narrativity play a large role.[1185] These ideas are often bound up with a notion of what it means to 'follow God', where ethics should not be thought of in terms of (positive) ideals. This, it is argued, would replace the living God with abstract propositions, turning ethics into an idol.[1186] Hence Dietrich Bonhoeffer placed Christ as the personal and concrete basis for ethics, which means that though “[t]he form of Christ is one and the same at all times and in all places [...] Christ is not a principle in accordance with which the whole world must be shaped.”[1187] The Christian should not be “fettered by principles, but bound by love for God” and as such “free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision.”[1188] Ethical principles are as “tools in God's hand, soon to be thrown away as unserviceable.” At most ethical principles are instrumental in an ongoing spiritual development, which again suggests a narrative or biographic take on such things as moral reasoning, virtues and rules, rather than a more abstract one.

In *biographical* ethics, moral characteristics can only be grasped as they exist in a concrete, personal history. William Stringfellow notes that “[t]he theological exploration of biography or the theological reconnaisance of history are apt, and even normative, styles because each is congruent with the definitive New Testament insight and instruction: *the Incarnation.*”[1189] As such the idea of

1182*Cant.* 334, p. 353
1183If so, we might draw on certain *semeiotic* ideas in this, but the problem with the *semeiotic* approach is, however, that it lacks a sufficient conception of the negative dialectics at play in negative theologies based on the Judeo-Christian distinction. It is no surprise that Peirce's natural theology is fundamentally panentheistic. Raposa 1989
1184Maybe this is why Gregory's treatment of his sister Macrina's life ends up exceeding “[...]the limits of a letter and stretches into a lengthy narrative.”? *VitMac.* 1, p. 21
1185See Stassen & Gushee 2003
1186See Bonhoeffer 1955
1187Bonhoeffer 1955, p. 65
1188Ibid., p. 50
1189Stringfellow 2005, p. 20

theology as biography is based on fundamental theological premises. But how we conceive of biography to a large degree depend on our views on such things as history, person, action, and of course modern ethics is typically based on theories of personal identity quite different from that of late antiquity. The modern individualistic and anti-traditionalistic idea of personhood makes it hard to explain how a moral epistemology as that proposed is possible.[1190] But as Gregory says: “[...]when one individual has made something his business, that form of activity makes its way into the stream of our life by being imitated.”[1191] Imitation of God's works automatically entails a tradition.

Hauerwas and Willimon has argued that the Church should be thought of, not so much as a collection of individual believers, but rather as a community in which a certain form of moral thought is bound up with a concrete tradition that sees itself as eschatologically narrated. Hence they complain that theological ethics after Constantine changed with especially Augustine. Augustine, in his interpretation of the *Sermon on the Mount,* moved the focus from its outward, practical demands to the subjective, by making its demand to turn the other cheek (Matt 5:39) a question of an “inward disposition”, rather than a bodily action.[1192] But “[s]uch interpretation is not supported by the text itself, which has as its role, not to cultivate some subjective attitude, but rather to form a visible people of God.”[1193] Theological ethics gradually became adapted to societal norms as Christianity was fused with imperial culture, says Hauerwas and Willimon. But our discussion of the 'ethics of invisibility' in especially *The Epistle to Diognetus* shows that we should be careful about making such distinctions, and that they did not simply develop gradually.

There are some credibility to Hauerwas' claim, though. What we find in *The Epistle to Diognetus* is not a distinction between the 'inner' and the 'outer' (e.g. the soul and the body, or the private and the social), but one between the Christians (plural) and the World. This distinction is marked by a certain paradoxality between invisibility and visibility. This again has to do with the paradoxality between imitating God as invisible on the one hand, and God as He reveals himself in the concrete historical works of Jesus Christ on the other. As God according to Tertullian “[...]is presented to our minds in His transcendent greatness, as at once known and unknown”[1194], the Christians are in *The Epistle to Diognetus*

1190MacIntyre 1981
1191*Cant.* 453, p. 481
1192Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 22.76
1193Hauerwas & Willimon 1989, p. 82
1194Tertullian, *Apologeticus pro Christianis* 17, p. 32. Discussed above.

simultaneously visible and invisible.

We have suggested that negative theology can imply anti-propositionalism (descriptions of value cannot be captured adequately in propositions), and a sort of holism of reasons (understanding a property as 'good' means understanding it as a negation of other, 'non-good' properties). This does not necessarily exclude the formulation and use of ethical principles. Anti-propositionalism only means that we cannot capture moral value or 'goodness' in general, direct, positive propositions. Holism does not mean that we cannot speak of standard reasons. That reasons are context dependent does not mean that they are not codifiable.[1195] But this codification cannot be abstracted from a concrete context. Hence we may need a sort of (non-formal) casuistry[1196], where paradigm cases are taken as the concrete historical (i.e. particular, rather than abstract and general) basis for moral reasoning in new contexts.[1197] Such thinking would not be possible with, e.g., an Eunomian idea of language, where analogy is untenable. Gregory of Nyssa clearly saw that any talk of relationality and likenesses was impossible with this idea of language, and thus substituted it for a theory of *epinoetic* language.

With Clement and Gregory, the paradigms used be ethical reflection must be biographical or at least take biographical elements into account. As Gregory writes in his early work *On Virginity:* "Any theory divorced from practice[...], is like the unbreathing statue, with its show of a blooming complexion impressed in tints and colours"[1198]. Gregory's own life turned out to become a good example of this. Gregory's theological development can itself be interpreted by reference to his mature works on spiritual progress. His early works are the works of a philosopher who pursues an adequate ethics, but the Eunomian controversies makes him realize that this is not possible, since theological language always works through conception. Hence in his mature works he is very reluctant to call his account of Moses' virtue adequate in any way.[1199]

The first and primary paradigm of Christian ethics must, of course, be the life of

1195McKeever & Ridge 2006

1196Toulmin & Jonsen 1988, p. 307. Toulmin & Jonsen argues that for casuistry "[...]*moral knowledge is essentially particular*, so that sound resolutions of moral problems must always be rooted in a concrete understanding of specific cases and circumstances." Toulmin & Jonsen 1988, p. 330. By 'non-formal' casuistry we here mean one that is not based on abstract and formal principles (the casuistry rejected by Bonhoeffer), but concrete cases. Bonhoeffer 1955, p. 51

1197Toulmin & Jonsen 1988, p. 251. Casuistry consists in "[t]he reliance on paradigms and analogies, the appeal to maxims, the analysis of circumstances, degrees of probability, the use of cumulative arguments, and the presentation of a final resolution."

1198*DeVir.*, p. 368, modified.

1199It is tempting to identify each of these stages with Moses' three theophanies in *On the Life of Moses*, but we will leave that possibility open.

Jesus Christ himself. Osborn, in his study of early Christian ethics, is right, however, when he says even if (or precisely because) Christian ethics must respect historical contingency, imitation of a historical account is not enough:

> "The imitation of Christ cannot look to a literal account of the historical Jesus. Following and assimilation are personal things which go beyond mechanical mimicry. A literal account could not rule centuries and civilisations in the way the gospels have. That is not what respect for contingency means. "[1200]

Osborn calls for a theology of hope.[1201] Only in anticipation of an eschatological future does imitation of Christ make sense beyond the literal historical account.[1202] As we have seen the ethics of of Clement and Gregory accounts for this, as following God does not only mean imitating the works of Jesus Christ (it also means that), but also means anticipating, reaching out for, the ineffable good which lies ahead. Describing how this looks like is a matter of biography, but in a way that never confuses the biography with its object, the invisible and ineffable God. Biographies are clusters of *diastemic* conceptions that veil and conceal but thereby also represent Truth: "*We* are each one of us parables."[1203]

Conclusion

In *The Epistle to Diognetus* the Judeo-Christian distinction is affirmed especially in the polemics against Pagan and Jewish forms of worship. Clement of Alexandria affirms the distinction when he says that nothing among created things can be a "representation of God", and that "it is utterly impossible for any one to become perfect as God is". Virtue in God and virtue in man is not the same, says Clement. Gregory of Nyssa affirms the distinction when he says that distance is nothing but creation itself, and that the interval that divides uncreated and created nature is wide and insurmountable. This interval is creation itself.

In all three cases kinds of negative theology follows from these claims. In *The Epistle to Diognetus* God is invisible and has never been discovered by 'philosophers'. In Clement of Alexandria God's difference from created things has to do with His simplicity and the fact the He is the first principle, from which follows that He is infinite and cannot be comprehended. In Gregory of Nyssa divine infinity bars any attempt to comprehend God's nature.

We have argued that in all three cases negative theology has consequences for

1200Osborn 1976, p. 219
1201As when Clement links *telos* and *elpis.* Osborn 1976, p. 219
1202This partly affirms Hauerwas' claims.
1203Stringfellow 2005, p. 20

ethics. In *The Epistle to Diognetus* this can be seen as the Christians in some way resemble God by being indiscernible from others, and thus invisibly present in the cities of the world as the soul is invisibly present in the parts of the body. A similar claim can be found in Clement, when he argues that the true Gnostic lives in the city, though as in the desert. The true Gnostic imitates God's simplicity and self-control. In Gregory's mature works he stresses that human beings (or humankind), as made in the image of God reflects the incomprehensibility of the divine nature, and is thus wholly ineffable. The soul is hidden, and only indirectly discernible through the activities of the body.

These notions of divine infinity and unity has consequences for social ethics, not least in Clement and Gregory who criticizes such things as property, inequality, power and slavery. These all break the unity of humankind by placing limits between human beings. Thus there follows a negative social ethics from certain negative theologies and an idea of humankind as created in the image of God.

In addition, the indefiniteness following from negative thinking is also a matter of human freedom and liberty. As is the case with the divine nature, human nature flees any attempt at final, positive definitions. Such can only refer to the activities, works and doings of God and human beings, but never their essence. Any attempt to place the essence of human beings in finite categories does violence to this fact. Imitation of God must be imitation of the freedom that follows from infinity. This can lead to a certain asceticism.

But there is also a positive and comprehensible side to imitation. In all three cases this has to do with imitation of the concrete deeds of God in Jesus Christ. As something positive, imitation of God means imitating the works of God in the atonement. In *The Epistle to Diognetus* we see that though Christians are indiscernible from others, their conduct can be described after all, since they do not pursue power and wealth, but imitate God's concrete work in Jesus Christ in the history of salvation by becoming servants for others. Clement in addition sees witnessing and teaching as characteristic activities of the true Gnostic. This fits neatly with his idea that the saving work of Jesus Christ too a large degree was a matter of moral teaching. In Gregory, the infinity of God means that no final positive description of the good is possible, whether this refers to God or the soul, the image of God. But Gregory also maintains that we can speak of God's activities, his immanent operations in time and space, and as a matter of imitating God this means imitating God's activities in the form of the works of Jesus Christ in the atonement. This takes place in an ethics of following, where following is a matter

of imitating the concrete actions of Jesus Christ rather than abiding by abstract rules.

There are of course great differences in the ethics of the three cases. The author of *The Epistle to Diognetus* stresses that Christians do not practice an extraordinary life, but imitate God's love for human beings as revealed in the history of salvation. But both Clement and Gregory defends a kind of asceticism, where the attainment of simplicity, self-control and similar is needed in order to imitate God. But where Clement prioritizes epistemology, Gregory prioritizes ontology.

There are in all three cases an apparent paradox between imitation of the invisible and the visible. In Clement this is partly solved through an idea of faith as voluntary anticipation, and in Gregory through the idea that the soul must always reach out for the divine good which always lies ahead (*epektasis*). Thus in both cases moral perfection is a matter of 'becoming' and action, rather than static being. Positive imitation of God is first of all a matter of doing. For Clement and Gregory 'life' is where such imitation takes place. Thus doing positive ethics must be a matter of doing biography.

This means that while there can arguably be general, true and adequate descriptions of moral wrongness (slavery, violence), there can be general and true, but not adequate, descriptions of moral goodness. Because of negative theology descriptions of the good must be negative, indirect definitions, and thus such descriptions are true because they lead to the divine good, but not adequate since they do never capture the good fully. This means that theological ethics must be conceived as a *theologia viatorum.* Hence we have a rough sketch of how a certain moral epistemology follows from the Judeo-Christian distinction and the negative theology produced by it.

It finally turns out that our title has been misleading: It is not about *doing* the unthinkable, but *becoming* an imitator of the unthinkable, while *doing* as Jesus Christ.

Appendix I: Terminology

A list of frequently used Greek words (in their most commonly used form) with special meanings and their translations, partly based on LSJ and PGL.

ἀδιάστατος: Without gap, without distance, continuous

ἀκατάληπτος: Incomprehensible

ἀκατονομάστος: Unnameable

ἀόρατος: Invisible

ἀόριστος: Unlimited

ἀχωρητος: Uncontainable

ἀγένητος: Unoriginate(d)

ἀγέννητος: Ungenerate(d), unbegotten, unborn

ἄγνωστος: Unknown

ἀλέκτῳ: Indescribeable

ἀθάνατος: Immortality

ἀθέατος: Invisible

ἀκολουθία: Following

ἀμορφος: Formless

ἀνείδεος: Formless

ἀναλλοίωτος: Unchangeable

ἀναφής: Impalpable

ἀνεξερεύνητος: Unsearchable

ἀνεξιχνίαστος: Inscrutable

ἀνεπιδεής, ἀνενδεής: Indeficient

ἀνεπίδεικτος: Hidden

ἀνεκδιήγητος: Indescribeable

ἀνεννόητος: Inconceivable

ἀνωνόμαστος: Unnameable

ἀπαθές: Impassible

ἄπειρον: Infinite

ἀπερίγραφος: Uncircumscribed

ἀπερινόητος: Unthinkable

ἀπόρρητος: Ineffable

ἀπόφασις: Negation, judgment

ἀπρόσιτος: Inaccessible

ἄρρητος: Ineffable

ἀσχημάτιστος: Formless
ἀσώματος: Incorporeal
αὐτοκρατές: Self-mastering
ἀφαίρεσις: Abstraction, removal
ἄφθαρτος: Incorruptible, immortal
ἄφατος: Unutterable
διάστημα: Gap, interval, distance
ἐλευθερία: Liberty
ἐνέργεια: Activity
ἔννοια: Notion
ἐπέκεινα: Beyond, above
ἐπέκτασις: Anticipation, reaching out, extension
ἐπίνοια: Conception
ἔργον: Work, function
κοινωνία: Fellowship, participation
μετουσία: Participation
μίμησις: Imitation
νόημα: Thought
οὐσία: Essence, being, existence
πρόληψις: Anticipation, preconception
στέρησις: Privation
φύσις: Nature

Abbreviations

Clement of Alexandria

Str. = Stromata (Miscellanies)
Protr. = Protrepticus
Paed. = Paedagogus
QuisDiv. = *Quis Dives Salvetur? (*Who is the Rich Man, that shall be Saved?)

Gregory of Nyssa

AdSimp = *Ad Simplicium de Fide* (On Faith)
Beat. = *Orationes viii de beatitudinibus (On the Beatitudes)*
Cant. = *In Canticum Canticorum (On the Song of Songs)*
ConEunI. = *Contra Eunomium I* (Against Eunomius 1-12)
ConEunII. = *Contra Eunomium II* (Answer to Eunomius' Second Book)

DeAnRes. = Dialogus de Anima et Resurrectione (On the Soul and Resurrection)
DeOrDom. = De Oratione Dominica (On the Lord's Prayer)
DeOp. = De Opificio Hominis (On the Making of Man)
DeProf. = De Professione Christiana ad Harmonium
DeVir. = De Virginitate (On Virginity)
DeVitMoys. = De Vita Moysis I+II (On the Life of Moses)
InDiem. = In Diem Luminum
InEccl. = In Ecclesiasten (Homilies on Ecclesiastes)
InHex. = Apologia in Hexameron
InIns. = In Inscriptiones Psalmorum (On the Inscriptions of the Psalms)
OrCat. = Oratio Catechetica (Great Catechism)
VitMac. = Vita Sanctae Macrinae (The Life of Macrina)

Epistle to Diognetus

AdDiog. = Epistola Ad Diognetum (The Epistle to Diognetus)

Biblical

ASV = American Standard Version; ESV = English Standard Version; NIV = New International Version; YLT = Young's Literal Translation; NRS = New Revised Standard w/ Apocrypha

Other

ANF = *The Ante-nicene Fathers: the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.d. 325.* Roberts, Donaldson & Coxe (ed.): 1885.
GNO = *Gregorii Nysseni Opera.* Jaeger et al (ed.), Vol. 1-, Brill, 1996-
LSJ = *A Greek–English Lexicon.* Liddel, Scott, Jones: 1996.
NPNF = *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.* Schaff & Wallace (ed.): 1893.
PG = *Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca.* J.P. Migne (ed.). Paris: 1857-1912.
SC = *Sources Chrétiennes.* Mondésert et al (ed.), Paris: 1942-
PGL = *A Patristic Greek Lexicon.* Lampe, G. W. H. (ed.), Oxford: 1961 (1989).
BDG = *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa.* Brill: 2009.

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Athanasius: *De Incarnatione.*

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